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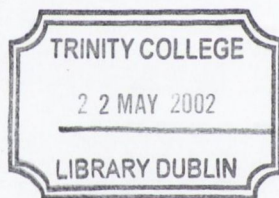
The Politics of Praise:

Influence and Authority in John Berryman's Poetry

Philip Coleman, B.A., M. Phil.

A Thesis submitted to the School of English
at the University of Dublin, Trinity College,
in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy.

October 2001



Thesis
6817

DECLARATION

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SUMMARY

This thesis is a reappraisal of John Berryman's achievement that stresses his poetry's critical agency over and against the prevailing tendency to describe it in narrow confessional terms. Questioning the received view of him as an author of autobiographical self-obsession, it surveys the range of Berryman's ideological engagements, from *The Dispossessed* (1948) to *Delusions, Etc.* (1972), in an attempt to provoke a broader and more engaged sense of his profile to counter the typical academic and popular transmission of Berryman which tends toward a reduction of the worldly possibilities presented by his work.

The evolution of what began as an analysis of the Berryman/Yeats relation into an account of the American poet's cultural politics is outlined in the introduction, where Berryman's unpublished essay "The American Intellectual and the American Dream" (1947) is cited as a central text in this study's re-negotiation of his place in twentieth-century American poetic history and criticism. The ideological significance of Berryman's early advocacy of Yeats is examined in more detail in the first chapter, however, where the transatlantic site of the Berryman/Yeats relation is interpreted as the ground for an evaluation of Berryman's interrogation of the authority of American exceptionalism. Including a discussion of the relationship between patrilinear theories of influence and exceptionalist understandings of American literary culture, this chapter provides a framework for the analysis of Berryman's poetry and its reception offered in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two begins by reconsidering the significance of the social and political backdrop to Berryman's early poetry. Emphasising the range of Berryman's literary and extra-literary engagements during the period he described as "the decade of Survival," this chapter foregrounds Berryman's public incursions in both *The Dispossessed* (1948) and *Berryman's Sonnets* ([1947], 1967). In challenging the common dismissal of *The Dispossessed* as mainly apprentice-work on the one hand, and the confessional containment of *Berryman's Sonnets* on the other, this chapter argues that Berryman's reluctance to publish his first major collection until 1948 needs to be considered in terms of his attitude to the changing perception of poetry's function during the 1940s and into the Cold War period.

Berryman began writing what is commonly referred to as his "breakthrough poem," *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, in 1948. The interrogation of contemporary American society and culture presented as an important (though commonly elided)

concern in the second chapter's examination of *The Dispossessed* and *Berryman's Sonnets* is described as a major thematic preoccupation of Berryman's "colonial poem" in the third chapter of this study. Drawing attention to his involvement with Ezra Pound in the late 1940s and his collaborations with Ben Shahn in 1956, this chapter considers Berryman's dystopian revisions of the American dream as a series of "nightmares of Eden" in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* which is read as an expression of his refusal to celebrate the exceptionalist understanding of American history and identity.

Berryman's descriptions of Anne Bradstreet's displacement in the New World pre-empt his figurations of dispossession and dislocation in *The Dream Songs*, the long poem he began writing in 1955 at the height of the Cold War era. The narrow confessional interpretation of *The Dream Songs*, which has dominated Berryman criticism, is dismantled in the fourth chapter. Focusing on the poem's exploration of various forms of authority, Berryman emerges here as a poet for whom the difficult relationship between self and world—contrary to the views of his most fervent detractors—is seldom avoided. An analysis of "Formal Elegy" (1964) supports this reading of *The Dream Songs* by describing what Berryman terms the contemporary American "scene of disorder" in this largely disregarded elegy for John F. Kennedy.

Chapter Five emphasises the compositional interconnectedness of Berryman's later work and reads *Love & Fame* (1970), *Delusions, Etc.* (1972), and *Recovery* (1973) in terms of Berryman's response to the largely reductive critical reception of *The Dream Songs*. By exploring the ways in which these texts re-place the self in society against the narrow confessional insistence that his work is invariably rooted in private concerns, this chapter promotes a reevaluation not only of Berryman's later work but of the worldly engagements of his poetry from the earlier part of his career. Rejecting the view that these texts are representative of an overwhelmingly introspective impulse in his writing, this chapter stresses the centrifugality of Berryman's poetry from this period in an attempt to redefine the critical boundaries for reading his late work. That point is taken further in the conclusion, which questions the exclusion of Berryman from groups more commonly associated with ideological inquiry in American cultural and literary history.

CONTENTS

<i>Abbreviations</i>	viii
<i>Introduction</i>	1
1. <i>Having it out with the majestic Shade:</i> Reconsidering the Consequences of Berryman's Engagement with Yeats	7
2. <i>Writing The Decade of Survival:</i> <i>The Dispossessed and Berryman's Sonnets, 1938-48</i>	47
3. <i>Nightmares of Eden:</i> Interrogations of the American Self in <i>Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, 1949-59</i>	90
4. <i>Denying the gods of the garden:</i> Figuring Authority in <i>The Dream Songs</i> and "Formal Elegy," 1960-69	140
5. On "not giving the whole thing up"; or, Reading through <i>Recovery:</i> Re-placing the Self in <i>Love & Fame</i> and <i>Delusions, Etc., 1970-72</i>	207
<i>Conclusion</i>	259
<i>Appendix 1: "The American Intellectual and the American Dream" (1947)</i>	266
<i>Appendix 2: Ben Shahn and Homage to Mistress Bradstreet</i>	272
<i>Bibliography</i>	274

ABBREVIATIONS

- DS* John Berryman, *The Dream Songs* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969; London: Faber and Faber, 1990)
- R* John Berryman, *Recovery* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973)
- FP* John Berryman, *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976)
- HF* John Berryman, *Henry's Fate & Other Poems, 1967-1972*, ed. John Haffenden (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977)
- CP* John Berryman, *Collected Poems 1937-1971*, ed. Charles Thornbury (1989; London: Faber and Faber, 1990)
- JBP* John Berryman Papers, Literary Manuscripts Collections, Elmer L. Andersen Library, University of Minnesota.

INTRODUCTION

Where did it all go wrong? There ought to be a law against Henry.
—Mr Bones: there is.

(DS 4)

The realisation that there was no scholarly monograph devoted to examining the relation between John Berryman and W. B. Yeats provided the initial impulse for this thesis. Most studies of Berryman's poetry acknowledge the importance of Berryman's engagement with Yeats, but the relation between them is generally perceived either in terms of Oedipal struggle or formal apprenticeship. Charles Thornbury's 1985 essay "John Berryman and the 'Majestic Shade' of W. B. Yeats" remains useful because it provides a detailed account of Berryman's (real and imagined) encounters with Yeats throughout his career.¹ Arguing that Berryman's "appropriation of Yeats's thinking about the material form, and style of poetry became the foundation of his greatest works"², however, Thornbury disregards the fact that Berryman's work is born out of an engagement not just with Yeats but with a wide range of literary and cultural sources, from Shakespeare to Bessie Smith. Thornbury's claim that "the sources of a poet's thinking about poetry may reveal more fully the mature poet's poetics and originality"³ is fair, but it overlooks the fact that, where Berryman's poetry is concerned, those "sources" are rarely reducible to the figure of Yeats.

Berryman's remark that "I began work in verse-making as a burning trivial disciple of the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats," is frequently quoted in studies of his work, but it is not always acknowledged that he concludes this remark by adding "and I hope I have moved off from there." (FP 323) Berryman's engagement with Yeats is often read in terms of the young poet's formal apprenticeship, and the trajectory of his career is divided between an early Yeatsian and a later (post-*Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*)

period when he is said to have found his own voice and style. Rather than rehearsing familiar claims regarding Yeats's formal influence on Berryman's poetry, this study interprets Berryman's early engagement with Yeats as a defining moment in his career because it signalled his rejection of mainstream American authority. Berryman's figurations of displacement and dispossession owe something to Yeats's writings, and Yeats's essay "Away" in particular, a copy of which is held in John Berryman's Personal Library at the University of Minnesota.⁴ Nevertheless, aesthetic or formal parallels between Berryman and Yeats are rarely examined here: the emphasis is placed instead on describing the range of critical and public engagements embodied by Berryman's poetry that, it is argued, may be traced back to the anti-isolationist turn towards Yeats taken by Berryman at the start of his career.

In his essay Thornbury poses two important questions concerning Berryman's engagement with Yeats:

If Berryman desires most to create his own power and authority as a skillful and passionate poet, the essential question, then, is not why or how he overcame the father but rather how and in what ways did he find his own authority? And thereafter did his new authority and voice owe anything to the father?⁵

Thornbury's second question undoes the denial of a covert (Bloomian) impulse to explain Berryman's work in terms of his relationship with Yeats as an authoritative father-figure in the first. Berryman's need to "find his own authority," moreover, involved much more than a desire to escape Yeats's influence. At the start of his career Berryman felt impeded by a more immediate (and more immediately problematic) presence than Yeats in the form of mainstream American authority itself, towards which he describes his antagonism in the unpublished essay "The American Intellectual and the American Dream" (1947).⁶ Berryman's early turn towards Yeats therefore represents an important and intentional movement away from American cultural authority, which he characterises as irresponsible and "anti-intellectual" in that essay. By turning towards

Europe (and Yeats) at the start of his career, Berryman was reiterating the expression of dissatisfaction with the American scene that defined the work of the “expatriate-American” writers Henry James, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound before him. “The problem of whether anything could be written *here* again seemed very important”, he writes in “The American Intellectual and the American Dream,” thus signalling his belief that the American ground of his cultural and social experience was inadequate to his sense of what was necessary to write major poetry.

This thesis does not attempt to deny or undervalue the role played by Yeats in the development of Berryman’s poetry, as Bruce Bawer does in his 1986 study *The Middle Generation*.⁷ It does argue, however, that Berryman’s poetic engagement with the figure of Yeats exemplifies the intertextual method that defines all of his major poetry. Moreover, an awareness of the strategic intertextuality of Berryman’s poetry is crucial to any understanding of his anti-isolationist cultural politics. The theoretical evolution of intertextuality is not explored in this study.⁸ Considered in the first instance as an expansive alternative to the patrilinear model of reading influence proposed by Harold Bloom, the concept is employed here to describe a method of textual production that problematises the narrow genealogical understandings of American poetic history posited, for example, by Roy Harvey Pearce and Albert Gelpi.⁹ Berryman’s rejection of what Karl Shapiro has termed the “Whitman-Williams isolationist” line in American poetic history is described in terms of the “Euro-cultural dispensation” of his work’s intertextual engagements—which fulfil an ideological as well as an aesthetic function.¹⁰ That analyses of the Berryman/Yeats relation are typically informed by reductionist theories of influence—whether formalist or Bloomian—may be read as a consequence of the more widespread refusal to appreciate or engage the ideological dimension of Berryman’s work.

The idea that Berryman's engagement with Yeats has an ideological dimension, however, is suggested by Stephen Matterson's 1997 essay "Tenth-Muse-Is, Or, The Discontinuity of American Poetry," which cites the absence of a major study of the Berryman/Yeats relation as an example of the (frequently covert) denial of European influences in critical descriptions of American poetry informed by the ideology of exceptionalism.¹¹ Berryman's poetry problematizes the hegemony of exceptionalist ideology because it constantly seeks to negotiate and maintain the bond between America and Europe. Henry's perennial transatlantic migrations in *The Dream Songs* are representative of Berryman's career-long refusal to be defined or contained in terms that affirm the isolationist understanding of American identity. "The American Intellectual and the American Dream" shows that one year before the publication of his first major collection (*The Dispossessed*) and within the same year that he began writing what is referred to as his "breakthrough poem" (*Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*), Berryman was expressing in unambiguous terms his feeling of alienation from mainstream American cultural authority. Berryman rarely expressed this dissension in overtly political terms in his work. Nevertheless, Berryman's poetry—early and late—registers a sense of displacement and disaffection that allows it to be considered as one of the most persistently inventive articulations of social and cultural criticism voiced by an American poet in the second half of the twentieth century. This view of Berryman as a poet whose work says something important about the state of the nation is rarely (and then uncomfortably) found in Berryman studies. This thesis seeks to redress that position by foregrounding the level of public engagement and critique in Berryman's poetry against the overwhelming critical focus on the autobiographical and narrow confessional aspects of his writing.

In an essay on Robert Lowell's poem "Skunk Hour" first printed as part of a symposium in *New World Writing* in 1962, Berryman quotes Randall Jarrell's comment

that “very complicated organizations are excessively rare in poetry.” (FP 322) With regard to Berryman’s work, however, Jarrell’s dictum is deemed redundant. Seeking “guideposts” for the analysis of work as complicatedly allusive as Lowell’s, Berryman argues that “we must allow, with some poets, for broad and complex areas of suggestion”. (FP 323) One of the “broad and complex areas of suggestion” that has been overlooked in studies of Berryman’s poetry is the extent to which his work engages with the public sphere. In response to the suggestion that “There ought to be a law against Henry” in *Dream Song 4*, Henry is told that one already exists. In a sense, a “law” exists in Berryman studies also which asserts that Berryman’s poetry is irreversibly introspective and entirely lacking in centrifugal agency. At this juncture, however, it might be well to bear in mind one of the epigraphs that Berryman used for *77 Dream Songs* in 1964, taken from Olive Schreiner’s novel *The Story of an African Farm* which was first published in 1883: “But there is another method.”¹² This study begins with a reassessment of the terms for reading the Berryman/Yeats relation and moves from there to consider the ideological consequences of that engagement. The emphasis throughout is on describing Berryman’s expansive engagement with American authority so that a revised profile of his achievement may come into focus over and against the apparently indomitable strictures of the narrow confessional focus of most Berryman criticism. In more general terms this thesis negotiates a basis for an understanding of poetic influence and engagement that offers an alternative to the models of psychoanalytical and formalist reduction advocated by Bloom and others. To use Berryman’s phrase, it encourages an appreciation—and examination—of “the politics of praise.” (CP 34)

NOTES

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- ¹ Charles Thornbury, "John Berryman and the 'Majestic Shade' of W. B. Yeats," George Bornstein and Richard J. Finneran, eds. *Yeats and Modern Poetry*. Special Issue of *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies* 3 (1985): 121-72, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985.
- ² Thornbury 124.
- ³ Thornbury 124.
- ⁴ W. B. Yeats, "Away," reprinted in *Uncollected Prose of W. B. Yeats*, eds. John P. Frayne and Colton Johnson, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976) 267-82. See also Richard J. Kelly, *John Berryman's Personal Library: A Catalogue* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999) 406.
- ⁵ Thornbury 122-23.
- ⁶ John Berryman, "The American Intellectual and the American Dream," Unpublished Non-fiction Prose, Box 1, File 22, John Berryman Papers. See Appendix 1.
- ⁷ In his study Bawer argues that T. S. Eliot is a more important influence on Berryman's writing than Yeats: "the early Berryman was above all a follower of Eliot, and borrowed nothing which did not further his purposes as an Eliotic poet." See Bruce Bawer, *The Middle Generation: The Lives and Poetry of Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1986) 90-103; 103.
- ⁸ For a more detailed account of the history of the concept of intertextuality see Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).
- ⁹ The relationship between Bloom's theory of influence and the exceptionalist understanding of American poetic history posited by Pearce and Gelpi is explored in Chapter 1, "The Politics of Praise?: Reconsidering the Consequences of Berryman's Engagement with Yeats."
- ¹⁰ See Karl Shapiro, foreword, *Letters of Delmore Schwartz*, ed. Robert Phillips (Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1984) xi-xiii; xi.
- ¹¹ Stephen Matterson, "Tenth-Muse-Isms, Or, The Discontinuity of American Poetry," in Cristina Giorcelli and Rob Kroes, eds. *Living with America, 1946-1996* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1997) 267-73; 271.
- ¹² Olive Schreiner, preface, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883; New York: Crown Publishers, 1968) xxvi-xxvii.

CHAPTER 1

HAVING IT OUT WITH THE MAJESTIC SHADE:

RECONSIDERING THE CONSEQUENCES OF

BERRYMAN'S ENGAGEMENT WITH YEATS

Carefully we choose
Our fathers, carefully we cut out those
On whom to exert the politics of praise.

(*CP* 34)

I wish we had a word for this, but I have not been able to think of one; if one occurs to any of you I should be very glad to hear it.

(John Berryman)¹

This chapter proposes the site of John Berryman's engagement with W. B. Yeats as the starting-point for an evaluation of the American poet's cultural politics, a central aspect of which is his interrogation of the ideology of American exceptionalism. In the first section Berryman's description of himself as a "burning, trivial disciple" of Yeats at the start of his career (*FP* 323), is questioned in the light of views expressed in, among other places, his unpublished essay "The American Intellectual and the American Dream" (1947).² Beginning with a reading of "Desire Is a World by Night" (*CP* 34-5) an interpretation of what in that poem Berryman terms "the politics of praise" is advanced in the second section as the basis for a more general critique of the relationship between understandings of literary influence and genealogy in the American context. Having established the importance of the ideological ground of Berryman's engagement with Yeats in specific literary critical and broad literary historical terms (including a consideration of the American critical evaluation of Yeats in the 1940s), the third section outlines the general significance of this reappraisal of Berryman's profile which will be examined more closely in subsequent chapters.

1. "A burning, trivial disciple"?

(i)

John Berryman's early poetry—up to and including the publication of *The Dispossessed* in 1948—is usually cast aside in the general surveys as mere apprentice work. Randall Jarrell's contemporary review of *The Dispossessed* describes an attitude that has often been repeated: "One looks forward with real curiosity and pleasure to Mr. Berryman's new poems, just as one looks back with real amusement and embarrassment to many of his old poems [...]."³ What Jarrell (and others) discerned as the "slavishly Yeatsian grandiloquence"⁴ of Berryman's earliest poems is increasingly forsaken in the later poems of *The Dispossessed*, but it is not until the first publication of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in the *Partisan Review* in 1953 that Berryman is said to have found his uniquely personal voice and style. This brief description of Berryman's engagement with (and subsequent break from) Yeats with the composition and first publication of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* is complicated, however, by the fact that Yeats is not entirely absent from either *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* or Berryman's later works. Indeed, not only was Berryman's choice of stanza form for *Bradstreet* suggested by a Yeatsian model—it is that used by Yeats in "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory"—but by associating Yeats with the figure of the "majestic Shade" in *The Dream Songs* (DS 312) it can be argued that the Anglo-Irish poet is more interestingly pervasive in Berryman's long poem than in the early poems of *The Dispossessed* where Yeats is easily recognised as the major influence on Berryman's forms and metres.

Berryman's career-long engagement with Yeats suggests that the dialogue between them concerned much more than the young American poet's purely aesthetic search for poetic form. Berryman's relationship with Yeats may be read in terms of a traditional master/apprentice dialogue, in which case Yeats's "lesson" for Berryman (to use the terms of Dream Song 312) is mainly a matter of formal instruction. The

engagement between Berryman and Yeats might also be read in terms of a Bloomian “Oedipal struggle” between the older “precursor” poet and the younger “ephebe.” Neither of these perspectives, however, one formalist and the other neo-Freudian, can explain the set of cultural and ideological problems that underpins the Yeats/Berryman relation. That set of problems concerns what Steven Matthews has tentatively described as Berryman’s “attempt to refound American poetry [...] on alternative terms to those deployed by Whitman,”⁵ through his encounter with Yeats. Because Matthews’ argument is informed by Bloom’s (neo-Freudian) theory of influence his study stops short of analysing the consequences of Berryman’s “refounding” of Yeats in terms of the American poet’s cultural politics.

The site of Berryman’s engagement with Yeats embodies a complex range of questions concerning the connections between his quest for poetic authority and his relationship with the American literary establishment at mid-century. In the nineteenth century, Whitman (in common with many other American writers) defined a sense of the American literary and cultural self in terms of nationalistic difference and prowess, by “making the American artist the new artist of mankind”⁶, as Malcolm Bradbury has put it. Berryman presented a covert challenge to the exceptional idea of American culture—posited most forcefully (in poetic terms) by Whitman—by turning towards the figure of Yeats (who has been described as “the last of the great European poets”⁷) at the start of his career. This is not to say that Berryman rejected Whitman completely: he did not, as his enthusiastic appraisal of Whitman’s achievement in “*Song of Myself: Intention and Substance*” indicates. Rather, Berryman was more closely aligned with what Karl Shapiro has called “the Euro-cultural dispensation” than he was with the “Whitman-Williams isolationist” tendency in twentieth-century American letters.⁸

(ii)

Berryman's self-conscious non-alignment with the "Whitman-Williams isolationist" disposition in American poetry can be considered as a consequence of his belief that the contemporary American scene was dominated by "an organized and powerful anti-intellectual culture or anti-culture," as he puts it in "The American Intellectual and the American Dream."⁹ In this piece his description of the alienation of American "intellectuals from sympathy with Amer[ican] authority" is followed by a consideration of the importance of expatriation as a form of protest or critique in twentieth-century American (literary) culture:

The *generation* is important: theirs & mine. Trained in the Left-wing decade, the Thirties; when the Depression and the American government's failure-in-regard-to-Spain alienated intellectuals altogether from sympathy with Amer[ican] authority.

Dominant artistic influences were expatriate-American: Eliot, Pound, James; and the expatriate-Twenties people (Hemingway, MacLeish etc.) The problem of whether anything could be written *here* again seemed very important.

Drawing on R. P. Blackmur's essay, "The American Literary Expatriate" (1944), in which the expatriate artist is described as "with us, here at home, in the only sense that he was ever actually elsewhere, whether in Paris or London or Rome"¹⁰, Berryman signals his identification with the expatriate writer and with what Blackmur terms the phenomenon of "ingrown" or "inward"¹¹ expatriation in particular. Berryman associated Blackmur's idea of "inward" expatriation with the sense of "alienation [...] from sympathy with Amer[ican] authority" that he shared with other writers of his generation, who came of age during the 1930s. Blackmur recognises this time as a watershed in American cultural history also when he writes that "the depression and the war [...] made clearer the significance of the true inward expatriation of the larger figures—men who make the study and the clarification of coteries and their snobberies and agonies either possible or desirable."¹² In terms of the development of his own

poetry and cultural politics—and where his assessment of Yeats’s example was concerned—the importance of “inward” expatriation was not lost on Berryman.

“Joyce’s expatriate shadow hung over us all” Berryman writes in a note to “The American Intellectual and the American Dream,”¹³ but in an allusion to “The Choice,” Yeats is suggested by Blackmur as an important modern example of “inward” expatriation, “the deep-riven swindling chasm between perfection of life and perfection of work and the stresses between these in a society which, for whatever reason, leaves the soul exiled in its only home.”¹⁴ Berryman recognised this characteristic of Yeats’s life and work also, and his poetry is marked by a deep awareness of the sense of displacement or being “Away” that Yeats described in an early essay of that title.¹⁵ Keeping in mind Terence Diggory’s claim regarding the general “attraction that W. B. Yeats’s prose has had for American poets,”¹⁶ Berryman’s interest in this particular piece of Yeats prose is supported by the fact that a copy of it, in the form of a handful of frail pages torn from a 1902 issue of the *Fortnightly Review*, is contained among the twenty listed items by Yeats in Berryman’s personal library, now housed at the University of Minnesota.¹⁷ No item among Berryman’s Yeats materials is as peculiar as this piece, which was uncollected until 1976 and therefore largely unobtainable (in book form at least) until after Berryman’s death in 1972.

“Away” has commanded much recent critical attention among Yeats scholars for a variety of reasons.¹⁸ What appears at first as a work of folklore or anthropological writing, however, is also a veiled description of Yeats’s own “variegated”¹⁹ poetic self, thwarted by inconsistencies of identity and place, engaged on a life-long quest for unobtainable personal and poetic unity or “home.” The essay begins with what appears to be a fairly detached description of a phenomenon that Yeats suggests is found all over Ireland, but it might also be interpreted as a figure for the general condition of dislocation or displacement that recurs throughout Yeats’s poetry:

There is, I think, no country side [sic] in Ireland where they will not tell you, if you can conquer their mistrust, of some man or woman or child who was lately or still is in the power of the gentry, or “the others,” or “the fairies,” or “the sidhe,” or the “forgetful people,” as they call the dead and the lesser gods of ancient times. These men and women and children are said to be “away,” and for the most part go about their work in a dream, or lie all day in bed, awakening after the fall of night to a strange and hurried life.²⁰

The phenomenon of being “Away” described here permeates Yeats’s poetry from the outset of his career, from the early narrative poem “The Wanderings of Oisín” to the lyrics of longing “The Stolen Child” and “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (all written before Yeats was thirty), to “High Talk” (included in his *Last Poems*) where Yeats suggests that displacement and homelessness are the main features of the modern condition when he writes: “I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk on; / Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn.”²¹ The kind of homeless wandering that may be discerned as a recurring motif in Yeats’s work is described also by Hermann Hesse in his early poem “*Ich weiss, du gehst*” (“I Know, You Walk”). Hesse’s poem ends: “*Du gehst und gehst, und findest nicht mehr nach Haus*”, which was translated into English by Berryman’s contemporary and friend James Wright as, “You walk, and walk, and find no home at all.”²²

Berryman’s appreciation of “Away,” and of its multiple and complex figurations in Yeats’s poetry as a general trope for the Anglo-Irish poet’s sense of displacement, is indicated by the extensive use he (Berryman) makes of the same figure in his own work, from Dream Song 1 where Henry is described as “wicked & away” to the poem that shares the title of Yeats’s essay in *Love & Fame* (CP 189), to cite but two examples. Berryman’s assimilation of this important Yeatsian trope in his work should not be considered as a merely formal inheritance, however, but it may also be read as an aspect of the American poet’s close identification with Yeats’s experience of “inward” expatriation and cultural displacement. In an unpublished lecture he delivered at the University of Utah in 1959, “Cross-fertilization in International Poetry,” Berryman—

having expressed some reservations about the term “influence” in itself—argued that the question is, “For Americans [...] unavoidably a central subject.”²³ In his notes he goes on to describe his understanding of literary influence as a matter of cultural positioning, of “remain[ing],” as he puts it, “alert and open to *all* poetries.”²⁴ In order to illustrate the importance of allusion in poetic practice, Berryman describes the intertextual dialogue with Rilke, Corbière, Dante, Issa, and others in Yeats’s work. Berryman’s reading of the allusive expansiveness of Yeats’s writing signals his recognition of the Anglo-Irish poet’s rejection of narrow cultural genealogies in favour of a more open and inter-national form of cultural self-positioning. In the American context, and where his own development was concerned, Yeats’s example provided Berryman with a poetic *and* a political alternative to the “Whitman-Williams isolationist” tendency that celebrated the Americanism he (Berryman) viewed with active disdain.

Seymour Martin Lipset has written that, “Being an American, however, is an ideological commitment. It is not a matter of birth. Those who reject American values are un-American.”²⁵ In “The American Intellectual and the American Dream” Berryman states in unambiguous terms his antagonism towards contemporary American culture and society:

I hate America. One’s attitude towards something so complex & pressing as one’s country can hardly fail to be ambivalent [...] but it’s as well to say explicitly at once what one *feels* one feels. I *hate* America, then. 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.²⁶

For Lipset, “the United States is a country organized around an ideology which includes a set of dogmas about the nature of a good society. Americanism, as various people have pointed out, is an ‘ism’ or ideology in the same way that communism or fascism or liberalism are isms.”²⁷ During Berryman’s lifetime the ideology of “Americanism” was represented by a “powerful anti-intellectual culture, or quasi-culture,” which forced him

to look across the Atlantic for examples of literary excellence at a time when the home culture, as he perceived it, was consumed by “grossness & ugliness & emptiness & pretentiousness”. Berryman’s “Euro-cultural” turn towards Yeats at the start of his career, then, was made with complete cognisance of its political and ideological implications. Berryman may be regarded as an “ingrown” expatriate who like Yeats, to paraphrase Blackmur, was an exile at home.

(iii)

In a letter to Richard Ashe King written in 1897 Yeats claimed that: “I have never written simply as a poet but always as a poet whose poems are an action as well as a thought.”²⁸ In a 1937 talk on Yeats at Cambridge University Berryman signalled his recognition of this characteristic of Yeats’s poetry when he argued that Yeats was “Fortunate in believing, actually and usefully, an elaborate and strange, if eclectic, mythology, which provide[d] him with concrete metaphor and End-Cause, invaluable instrument for statement.”²⁹ His recognition of Yeats’s belief in the value of metaphor as an “invaluable instrument for statement” is crucial because it expresses the idea that poetic figures (“high figures” as he calls them in *Dream Song* 312) may fulfil more than an aesthetic function and embody a poet’s cultural politics, his feelings on the state of the nation. Berryman would have appreciated 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, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions.”³⁰ If his poetry does not present clear “solutions” to the problems that he perceived in American culture and society, however, it may yet be read as a body of work that registers some of the “contradictions” of American culture in a manner that has rarely been acknowledged in Berryman studies.

The American historian Richard Hofstadter has written that, “It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies, but to be one.”³¹ Berryman’s late description of himself as a “burning, trivial disciple” of Yeats may then be regarded as a form of *faux-naïveté* that diverts critical attention away from the important ideological factors that caused him to reject American culture at the start of his career. The critical repercussions of Berryman’s rejection of America—embodied by his fervent early turn towards Yeats—may be traced throughout his poetry, and long after the figure of Yeats has ceased to be an obvious *formal* influence on his writing. Moreover, Berryman’s engagement with and appropriation of Yeats has ramifications for a revised understanding not only of Berryman’s profile in American literary history, but in a more general context of the connections between literary influence and American exceptionalism. Beginning with an analysis of “Desire Is a World by Night” (CP 34-5) that exposes Berryman’s awareness of the ideological and political aspects of literary production, the next section explores a number of general issues relevant to this study’s reevaluation of Berryman’s cultural politics, including the relationship between literary influence and American exceptionalism. An appreciation of Berryman’s position relative to the contemporary American reception of Yeats’s achievement is also undertaken so that a more comprehensive understanding of Berryman’s critical engagement with Yeats may be brought into focus. In short, this next section examines a number of key issues pertaining to Berryman’s engagement with Yeats and demonstrates their significance in understanding what Berryman termed “the politics of praise.” (CP 34)

2. Understanding “The Politics of Praise”

(i)

Berryman, who would later write that “Freud was some wrong about dreams, or almost all” (*DS* 327), problematises the psychoanalytical understanding of the relationship between dreams and reality in “Desire Is a World by Night.” (*CP* 34-5) First published in *The Dispossessed*, it is a poem that has been generally overlooked in Berryman studies, although John Bayley has described it as one of those poems of Berryman’s early period that is, as he puts it, “unemancipated from Auden”³². Bayley’s insinuation of Berryman’s formal servitude to Auden is interesting, however, because Berryman contests the formalist understanding of influence in the poem’s second verse paragraph where he suggests that “influence” has another—ideological—dimension, which he terms “the politics of praise.” If Bayley is not referring to Berryman’s formal debt to Auden, he may be referring to his assimilation of the English poet’s interest in Freud, although he adds that “Auden was far too intellectually in shape to be successfully digested by Berryman”³³. Bayley’s account, however, fails to appreciate the way in which “Desire Is a World by Night” seeks to complicate, rather than simplify or “digest,” the reductive understandings of the self and society posited by the versions of psychoanalysis (and Marxism) often associated with (early) Auden—not that it is possible to “resolve the difficulties” of Auden’s poems “by finding allegories of Freud and Marx” either, as Edward Mendelson has noted.³⁴

Although each of its four verse paragraphs may be read as an attempt to describe the dreams of various people, from “strangers” to friends, parents and fellow poets, “Desire Is a World by Night” also suggests that human reality cannot be wholly understood by referring to psychoanalysis or the interpretation of dreams. Dreams, Berryman suggests, and the telling of them, can have the power to “puzzle, dazzle us / with endless journeys through the unfriendly snow,” but they are only interpretable

when considered in their social or communal context: “We have a stake in this particular region, and *we look / Excitedly for situations that we know.*” (CP 34; emphasis added) The poem, indeed, refers to the kinds of social conditions that are often overlooked by psychoanalytical inquiry:

The history of strangers in their dreams
Being irresponsible, is fun for men,
Whose sons are neither at the Front nor frame
Humiliating weakness to keep at home
Nor wince on principle, wearing mother grey,
Honoured by radicals. When the mind is free
The catechetical mind can mince and tear
Contemptible vermin from a stranger’s hair
And then sleep.

(CP 34)

The speaker of these lines is clearly suspicious of the “catechetical mind” of the analyst coldly exploring the “history of strangers in their dreams” without any regard for their daily lives. In the fourth verse paragraph of the poem Berryman goes further with his criticism of psychoanalysis and suggests that a dream’s meaning can never be fully resolved because it is usually repressed: “Let the evidence be buried in a cave / Off the main road.” (CP 35) This may be read as an acceptance of a central facet of Freudian theory (the subject’s repression of images and memories from the conscious region of his/her mind), but the poem’s conclusion is more complicated than that, and should be read as a cautious synopsis of the psychoanalytic method that insists on the inevitable return to the world with “Fresh sweat upon our foreheads, as they [our dreams] fade”.

(CP 35)

“Desire Is a World by Night” is clearly concerned with describing the life of the mind as it has been opened up by the advances of psychology and psychoanalysis in the twentieth century. The “gangs of the grey dead / Running directionless” in the fourth verse-paragraph of the poem, however, may be considered as a figure for the actual dislocation or cultural displacement that Berryman felt as a consequence of the “inward”

expatriation he associated with forms of cultural and political alienation. Berryman's sensitivity to the stifling "anti-intellectual" forces of mainstream American authority—from which he felt himself "alienated [...] altogether" at the start of his career—is described in the second verse-paragraph of this poem where he writes: "Carefully we choose / Our fathers, carefully we cut out those / On whom to exert the politics of praise." (CP 34) Taken out of its psychoanalytical frame of reference, this poem (and these lines in particular) signal Berryman's awareness of the broader social, cultural, and political consequences of an individual's self-positioning in relation to his/her parents and/or precursors. Read as a description of the dynamics of literary influence as a process of political choice and ideological alignment, Berryman's formulation of "the politics of praise" has consequences that extend beyond the study of his work to more general investigations of the relationship between authority and genealogy in the American literary context.

(ii)

Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein have shown that the notion of literary influence as a topic of serious intellectual concern became current in the eighteenth century when critics started to focus attention on "originality" and "genius" in the critical evaluation of literary works.³⁵ Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the general study of influence within literary studies was, as they point out, "an author-centred and evaluative concept, and an important tool for literary historians."³⁶ With the passing of time, however, scholars began to wonder less about those issues in themselves and became increasingly concerned about *how* claims regarding one author's influence over another could be empirically established and evaluated. A number of critics broached this problem in the second half of the twentieth century; Ihab H. Hassan and Göran Hermerén both published detailed articles and monographs on the subject.³⁷ Nevertheless, Harold Bloom's theory of influence, which was established with the

publication of four books between 1973 and 1976, has had the most significant impact on modern literary studies.³⁸

Most readers of Bloomian influence theory take the view that, as Peter de Bolla has explained, Bloom presents poetic history as “an enormous family romance, with one poet struggling against his poetic father and so on.” “Seductive as this little narrative might be,” de Bolla continues, “it is not what Bloom means by influence.”³⁹ Contrary to popular opinion, Bloom’s theory of influence, de Bolla holds, has nothing (or very little) to do with the Freudian paradigm of son warring against father in some kind of contest or Oedipal struggle. Bloom himself has explained that he is not interested in “an anxiety about the father, real or literary, but an anxiety achieved by and in the poem, novel, or play.”⁴⁰ He describes himself as a “deliberate revisionist of Freudian emphases” and not merely as a critic who transposes Freudian schema from a clinical to a literary setting.⁴¹ Bloom’s theory presents a methodology, six “revisionary ratios” which, when applied to the works of the pair of poets under consideration (the “precursor” and “ephebe”) can help to explain whether or not the younger poet has managed to “swerve” away from the influence of the precursor into a state of poetic originality and strength in his/her own right.⁴² Applying Bloom’s theory, however, his “marvellously Byzantine theory,”⁴³ as Clayton and Rothstein have described it, is no easy matter. Jonathan Culler, for example, has criticised Bloom for “scarcely elucidating” the process he outlines in *A Map of Misreading*.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the main problem with Bloom’s theory as far as this study of Berryman’s engagement with Yeats is concerned is not the usability of his model, but what Frank Lentricchia has described as its “non-referential” emphasis.⁴⁵ Lentricchia argues that Bloom perceives the poet as an altogether aloof, solipsistic individual, separated from the world of history, politics and culture. “Extraliterary forces,” he notes, “are utterly irrelevant to the Bloomian project.”⁴⁶

James Longenbach has offered a valuable criticism and alternative to the Bloomian anti-contextualist model of literary influence as anxiety, struggle, and division.⁴⁷ He writes that, although “There is a long tradition in romantic poetry of associating the desire for originality with anxiety and competition [...] there is an equally long tradition of associating it with openness and generosity.”⁴⁸ Longenbach proposes Berryman as the exemplar of such openness in the history of American poetry in the twentieth century, citing his (Berryman’s) statement—made in a review of Robert Lowell’s poetry in 1947—that “there is no competition either on Parnassus or on the hard way up there.” (FP 286) Longenbach describes a situation where the younger poet engages with the older poet (or with his/her contemporaries) in constructive dialogue, as part of a process of positive encounter that engenders a greater degree of magnanimity in the general narrative of literary history than that proposed by the Bloomian paradigm of inter-generational poetic conflict. Longenbach’s model of magnanimous exchange is similar to that described by Berryman in his unpublished lecture “Cross-fertilization in International Poetry,” where he writes that “the poet, if he has any respect for his gift and art, should *know* as much as possible as thoroughly as possible.”⁴⁹ There Berryman advocates the study of and engagement with other writers based on informed intellectual *choices* that will, he suggests, enable the poet to “recognize [his] subject, [and] enable [him] to formulate, to get things into expressive form”⁵⁰. In other words, Berryman understands literary influence in terms of a dynamic of choice and positive exchange that is more closely aligned with the model suggested by Longenbach than that prescribed by Bloom.

The criticisms of Bloom’s theory of literary influence presented by Lentricchia and Longenbach, and prefigured by Berryman, all rest upon a fundamental objection to the inherently reductionist and/or non-referential nature of the Bloomian project. Bloom’s model operates along rigorous principles of exclusion and his version of “the

Western Canon” attests to this character of his work. Robert Lowell and Philip Larkin, for example, are *almost* excluded from Bloom’s “canonical prophecy” where he writes: “Robert Lowell and Philip Larkin are here because I seem to be the only critic alive who regards them as over-esteemed, and so I am probably wrong and must assume that I am blinded by extra-aesthetic considerations [...]”⁵¹ The lack of “extra-aesthetic considerations,” however, is precisely the reason why so many critics find Bloom’s theory of influence objectionable. As Lentricchia has commented, Bloom often proceeds “as if [he] had never read [a] poet’s letters and journals, or as if, having read them, [he] had come to the conclusion that the worldly life they found portrayed therein pertained to somebody else.”⁵² Lentricchia would no doubt agree with Larkin who wrote that “Unpublished work, unfinished work, even notes towards unwritten work all contribute to our knowledge of a writer’s intentions; his letters and diaries add to what we know of his life and the circumstances in which he wrote.”⁵³

Lentricchia’s concern that “the worldly life” of poetry be redeemed echoes Charles Rosen’s idea that the poetic text “refers beyond words to the totality of the culture that produced it”⁵⁴. Within the American literary historical context, however, the notion of “the totality” of cultural production and national identity poses a particularly complex set of problems. Based upon principles and strategies of exclusion and reduction similar in application to those found in Bloom’s theories of literary influence and canonicity, the construction of American literary and cultural identity has often been based around the establishment of the same kinds of “critical myths” exposed by Paul Bové in his critique of Bloom’s analysis,⁵⁵ the “fables agreed upon” described by Ralph Waldo Emerson in the nineteenth century.⁵⁶ As Philip McGowan has written, “Constructions of American identities have been and continue to be patterned around the search for a representative American figure who embodies the dominant culture of the period.”⁵⁷ The political belief in the existence of such a “representative American

figure” is bound up with the rhetoric of American exceptionalism, based as it is upon the cultural prioritising (*and* mythologising) of American identity. Berryman’s fervent and self-conscious early turn towards Yeats signals his rejection of the “Whitman-Williams isolationist” understanding of American identity. Considered as an act of cultural betrayal that gesture is central to the destabilisation of the exceptionalist idea of a unified American self carried out in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, *The Dream Songs*, and in many of the shorter poems at either end of his career.

(iii)

Byron E. Shafer has defined American exceptionalism as “the notion that the United States was created differently, developed differently, and thus has to be understood differently—essentially on its own terms and within its own context.”⁵⁸ The ideology of American exceptionalism, Deborah Madsen suggests, “permeates every period of American history and is the single most powerful agent in a series of arguments that have been fought down the centuries concerning the identity of America and Americans.”⁵⁹ It is not surprising, then, that many critical narratives of American literary history and literary identity have been imbued with, if not wholly informed by, exceptionalist strategies. Stephen Matterson has provided an account of the phenomenon in literary studies by examining the exceptionalist positions implicit in two of the most prominent narratives of the history of American poetry: Roy Harvey Pearce’s *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961), and Albert Gelpi’s *The Tenth Muse: The Psyche of the American Poet* (1975).⁶⁰ Matterson’s essay reveals some of the connections between American exceptionalism and literary influence, but it also indicates the extent to which narratives of influence informed by exceptionalist rhetoric and ideology frequently undervalue and ignore literary relationships and engagements occurring across the transatlantic divide.

Berryman's engagement with Yeats is cited by Matterson as an important example of a transatlantic literary dialogue whose significance has been elided in narratives of American literary history at least partly because of the dominance of exceptionalist ideology in American literary criticism. He contends, moreover, that many major narratives of American literary history have tended to exclude Europe and Europeans from their analyses. David Ignatow, in his foreword to the 1987 reprint of Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry* describes the book's first appearance in 1961 "as a godsend to help clarify, settle, and fix firmly the overview that had to be taken of American poetry in midst of the social and cultural upheaval of the times."⁶¹ Read in its Cold War context, Ignatow's claim has a clear political/ideological dimension. Matterson describes this in his analysis, where he writes that, "It is easy to forget, or to overlook, the starting point of Pearce's book; his 1954 lectures on the history of American poetry at the Salzburg seminar in American Studies."⁶² Matterson continues:

Hence the very origin of the book [*The Continuity of American Poetry*] lay in the will to characterise American poetry as separate from European, and even to demonstrate this separateness to Europeans. It would certainly not be fanciful also to see *Continuity* as belonging to a cold-war ethos of stabilising a separate American identity at home and promoting it abroad.⁶³

What Matterson describes as Pearce's "will to characterise American poetry as separate from European" in terms of a larger project of reinforcing or stabilising "American identity at home" links Pearce's literary historical project with such instruments of Cold War ideology as the "National Defence Education Act," which was signed into legislation in September 1958 with the primary aim of providing funding for the development of research programs in American universities. (It might, indeed, be remembered that this Act came into effect less than eleven months after the Soviet Union launched its *Sputnik* satellite in 1957, and, as Robert A. Divine has argued: "While many observers stressed the military danger implicit in *Sputnik*, others saw it as a cultural challenge."⁶⁴)

Read in its Cold War context, in other words, Pearce's study may be considered as part of a greater drive to reinforce the national sense of cultural strength and greatness. Pearce accomplishes this, in part, as Matterson points out, by excluding European writers and their influences from his consideration of individual American poetic talents and achievements—by presenting, in short, an exceptionalist version and vision of American poetic history. Matterson argues that the familial paradigm utilised by Albert Gelpi in his study of the history of American poetry exhibits similar traces of exceptionalist ideology. Indeed, Gelpi explains that his book's sub-title (*"The Psyche of the American Poet"*) was chosen to emphasise the fact that his primary concern in writing the book was to emphasise "the separation of American poetry from its British parent."⁶⁵ Matterson's critique explains how Gelpi's "family tree" model of literary history is crucial to the American critic's attempts to exclude European (but mainly British) writers from his proposed genealogy of American poets. Gelpi, however, cannot overlook the important connections between much American writing and its European sources, no more than he can ignore the frequent "cross-fertilizations" (to use Berryman's term) that have enriched literary culture on both sides of the Atlantic. Moreover, Gelpi cannot separate his desire to erase Europe from the lives and works of the poets he discusses from the overwhelming impression Europe frequently made—and continues to make—on those poets themselves.⁶⁶ One thinks especially of Emerson who, despite his claim that the American scholar had "listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe", frequently acknowledged the importance of Shakespeare, Swedenborg, Coleridge, Carlyle, Montaigne, and other European figures in his writing.⁶⁷

The ideological impulse implicit in Gelpi's project, a project that seeks to exorcise Europe from "the psyche of the American poet", may be discerned more generally in American literary history, as Bradbury suggests, in studies by Richard Chase, Leslie Fiedler, and R. W. B. Lewis, among others.⁶⁸ Berryman, indeed, recognised the

same tendency in Maxwell Geismar's 1947 study of American fiction *The Last of the Provincials: The American Novel*, which he reviewed for the *Partisan Review* in 1948. Berryman criticised Geismar's study for its "provinciality" before adding: "And keep those Europeans out!—so that Joyce is never mentioned, Mann only when Miss Cather praises him, Yeats only in a quotation from Lewis, Gide only in a phrase, Proust casually twice, the great English and Russian novelists scarcely at all"⁶⁹. Nearly three decades later Leo Marx repeated Berryman's criticism of exceptionalist provincialism when he interrogated the American literary critical desire to assert "the uniqueness of American experience" which, he argued, must be considered as "a nationalistic fantasy."⁷⁰ Marx made this remark, according to Denis Donoghue, at the Salzburg Seminar in 1975, warning the scholars present to "expose, once and for all, the dangers inherent in all variations of the idea of American exceptionalism."⁷¹ Literary scholars have been slow to take up this challenge and, as Matterson has shown, numerous single-author studies of American poets have proceeded as if Europe (and European influences on American poetry) did not exist. The exceptionalist refusal to acknowledge Europe (and what Berryman termed the "cross-fertilization" of modern poetry) may be discerned also in the general attempt to decontextualise Yeats's writings by practitioners of the New Criticism in the 1940s, for whom the Anglo-Irish poet's cultural or political engagements as a major European writer were of minimal, indeed negligible, interest.

(iv)

When Yeats died in January 1939 Berryman wrote an obituary in which he described the "astonishing [...] versatility" of Yeats's art, remarking that "a list of Yeats's best poems is a list of the twentieth century masterpieces."⁷² Louis MacNeice made a similar point in the first major study of Yeats's work, published in 1941, where he wrote that if he "were making a general anthology of shorter English poems, [he] should want to include some sixty by W. B. Yeats."⁷³ T. S. Eliot, in many respects the widely acknowledged heir

to what Berryman called Yeats's "imperial sway" (*CP* 184), proclaimed something of the universal respect that Yeats had come to command in the last two decades of his life when he described his achievement in the following terms in the first Yeats Lecture at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, in 1940: "he was one of those few whose history is the history of their own time, who are part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them."⁷⁴ Eliot's praise was not without its reservations, however, and he described Yeats's early poems as "beautiful, but only craftsman's work, because one does not feel in them the particularity which must provide the material for the general truth."⁷⁵ Moreover, Eliot argued that Yeats's greatness, though "secure," required interrogation, what he called "a full and elaborate examination of the total work."⁷⁶

In his study of Yeats's work MacNeice offers an introduction to the variety of Yeats's achievement, admonishing Yeats for the decadent excesses of his early poetry but concluding that he is "a less simple and a more substantial poet than many of his detractors and some of his admirers think him."⁷⁷ Richard Ellmann, whose *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* was first published in 1948, is a more thorough early book-length survey, principally because it was also the first study of Yeats's writing to make use of the dead poet's manuscripts and papers, "some 50,000 pages of unpublished manuscripts" that George Yeats permitted the American scholar to work with in 1945.⁷⁸ Berryman, unhappy with what he described as the "badly written" and "spiritless affair" of Ellmann's book, made notes towards a critical biography of Yeats that never came to anything.⁷⁹ He also tried to convince A. J. Putnam, an editor for Macmillan publishers, of his ability to put together a volume of essays dedicated to Yeats's memory.⁸⁰ In the final paragraph of his letter to Putnam, Berryman wrote that the book would not only be "the best tribute that can be afforded to the greatest poet of this century," but "that it [would] be a permanently valuable commentary." He closed the letter by reminding

Putnam that “Criticism has never been more responsible than it is now in America and England, and it could have no better object.”

What Berryman meant by the “responsibility” of contemporary criticism may be interpreted in terms of his understanding of the way that some forms of contemporary criticism were more closely concerned with issues of history, identity, and cultural politics than others. This general distinction may be discerned in the responses to Yeats’s work published in the Winter 1941 issue of *The Southern Review*, a Yeats Memorial Issue which gathered contributions from most of the major American literary scholars and commentators of the time, representing a range of critical and institutional positions.⁸¹ Including essays by R. P. Blackmur, T. S. Eliot, F. O. Matthiessen, Kenneth Burke, Delmore Schwartz, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate, among others, its relevance to this study’s examination of Berryman’s engagement with Yeats is supported by the fact that, as Charlotte H. Beck has noted, Berryman’s most important early publications were in *The Southern Review* and, indeed, “Berryman thus owed considerable credit to the journal as a vehicle of self-discovery and presentation before the literary world at a very insecure time in [his] career.”⁸²

In his contribution to the volume Ransom explored in high New Critical fashion what he described as “the grim particularistic factuality” of the second and third lines of Yeats’s “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”:

The cabin, built of two materials, both vivid country ones; the agricultural provision for beans only, and honey; the bean rows exactly nine in number; of bee-hives, only one, though I never constructed the singularity of its tenant also as a point of principle but took that locution in the collective way of speaking. All these items tend decidedly into synecdoche, the mention of the part for the whole. I should like to propose the ground for that. The nostalgic vision, the image stubbornly preserved by the memory and brought out on every occasion, is one of the truest instances of aesthetic image, and it always seems to fall into a fixation round some very sharp detail or set of details elected from its totality. This is a device for enforcing the particularity of the object, for saying: This object and no other.⁸³

Ransom's analysis and its presentation of Yeats's poem as an instance of perfected artifice is an excellent example of New Critical close reading. His description of the poetic text as "one of the truest instances of aesthetic image" is a reminder of Cleanth Brooks' figure (after Donne) of the poem as a "Well Wrought Urn," in his book (and New Critical manifesto) *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, which was first published in 1947. Moreover, Ransom's vision of Yeats's cabin "built of two materials, both vivid country ones; the agricultural provision for beans only, and honey", is emblematic of what Terry Eagleton has called "the right-wing 'blood and soil' politics of the Agrarian movement,"⁸⁴ with which the New Criticism has been linked.

Allen Tate, another proponent of the New Criticism, offers an analysis that is finally less conclusive in its evaluation of Yeats's poetry.⁸⁵ Tate begins his essay by stating that: "The profundity of Yeats's vision of the modern world and the depth of its perspective have kept me until this occasion from writing anything about the poetry of our time which I most admire."⁸⁶ Tate refuses to summarise Yeats's verse in the finite critical terms used by Ransom, and he suggests that "Yeats had a more inclusive mind than any of his critics have had."⁸⁷ At first, the terms proposed by Tate for the study of Yeats's poetry appear to work against the kind of limiting New Critical procedures found in Ransom's analysis, which seek to reduce Yeats's work to a series of purely aesthetic gestures. "Yeats's special qualities," Tate writes, "will instigate special studies of great ingenuity, but the more direct and more difficult problem of the poetry itself will probably be delayed."⁸⁸ Tate's analysis, however, fails to provide any real sense of the relevance of Yeats's work *outside* of the New Critical frame of reference. That failure to specify the exact nature of the "special studies" he calls for may in fact be read as a symptom of the New Critical evasion of—and aversion to—external factors and historical or contextual modes of literary inquiry.

Tate's request for a fuller analysis of the diverse and manifold implications of Yeats's work is expressed in clearer terms in the contributions to the same collection offered by Delmore Schwartz and F. O. Matthiessen.⁸⁹ Indeed, the essays by Schwartz and Matthiessen may be read *against* the New Critical evaluations of Ransom and Tate as examples of a response to Yeats's achievement that is more acutely aware of its cultural and political contexts and engagements. Schwartz's essay begins "by taking some of the questions, problems, and mysteries which Yeats makes inevitable and consider[s] them under the figure of an unwritten book."⁹⁰ Among the chapter-headings he suggests for this book are "*Yeats in Ireland*," "*Yeats in Himself*," "*His Lyric Poems*," "*His Mastery of Expression*," and "*Yeats in Europe*." Significantly, the latter heading occupies the greater part of Schwartz's analysis. Beyond the narrow, strictly textual focus of New Critical analysis, critics interested in the cultural and historical contexts of Yeats's writing, such as Schwartz, viewed him as the most important English-language representative of modern European letters. Yeats, as far as Schwartz was concerned, was inextricably bound up with the vicissitudes of European literary expression in the first half of the twentieth century. Moreover, text and context (and the *European* context of Yeats's writing in particular) are inseparable for Schwartz: "It is impossible[.]" he argues, "to avoid a recognition of how important Europe is in the thinking of Yeats."⁹¹

Schwartz's understanding of Yeats is less a portrait of "*Yeats in Europe*" than an account of "Europe in Yeats." He affirms Yeats's prominence not as an isolated Irish poet but as "a European man, intensely interested in and moved by what was happening in Paris, where the Symbolist movement reigned as he began to write, and in England, where his books were published."⁹² Schwartz argues that although Yeats began his career at the height of the decadent movement when "Art for Art's sake" was in the ascendant, he (Yeats) came to write a poetry that was inextricably bound up with the difficult social and political realities of "modern life." He reads Yeats as a poet for

whom art cannot be separated from reality, and he presents the Anglo-Irish poet's work as an important example of the way that "international causes [...] have a serious effect upon the literature of our time":

Born at the height of the Victorian period, becoming a writer during the Nineties, living through the years which culminated in the first World War, arriving at his true mastery and power during the Post-War period, and dying four months after the signing of the Munich Pact, Yeats suggests, just to begin with, the kind of table of contemporary events which is often found at the beginning of a great poet's collected poems. But it is much more than a matter of interesting correspondences. Yeats died the same month that *The Criterion* was suspended, because, as the editor [T. S. Eliot] said, the Munich Pact seemed to make no longer possible the assumptions upon which the magazine had been based. Let this stand as a sign of the international causes which have a serious effect upon the literature of our time. The Munich Pact destroyed or helped to destroy an important magazine. In Yeats himself, from the beginning of his career to the very end, what happened in the Europe of his time penetrated his whole being as a poet, despite his serious sincere belief that he was writing, for the most part, *sub speciae aeternitatis*.⁹³

The importance of Yeats's example, according to Schwartz, is inextricably bound up with his inter-nationalism, his ability to draw on diverse sources in the production of poetry. His appraisal of Yeats as a major European (and therefore "inter-national") writer, occupying a cultural scene that includes figures as diverse as Synge, Stravinsky, Rilke, and Joyce, allows Schwartz to advance the claim that in the twentieth century, "culture [itself] has become international."⁹⁴ This point expresses not only a fairly standard claim regarding Yeats's work and its contexts—it is described, for example, by Edmund Wilson in *Axel's Castle* (1931)⁹⁵—but it also reflects a belief (frequently expressed in Schwartz's poetry) that culture (American and/or European) is an international phenomenon. That claim very subtly undermines the exceptionalist project of re-defining the American self that was gaining hegemonic momentum in the United States through the Second World War, and that came to dominate American cultural and intellectual self-reflection during the Cold War decades that followed.

F. O. Matthiessen's contribution to the Yeats Memorial Issue of *The Southern Review* also expresses some of the elements of Schwartz's anti-exceptionalist argument.

Matthiessen was regarded as a key figure of the “Pound-Eliot-Richards gang” at Harvard in the 1930s and ’40s.⁹⁶ That “gang,” as Richard Poirier has explained, was not only “led by Matthiessen” but it was “trans-Atlantic in its interests and [...] thought of culture and of civilisation as involving the burdens of an inheritance principally European.”⁹⁷ This is a point that Matthiessen clarified two years before his death in *From the Heart of Europe* (1948), where he wrote that “I am most absorbed with the interplay of thought and expression between America and Europe.”⁹⁸ The anti-isolationist aspect of Matthiessen’s cultural politics has been largely overlooked by critics who prefer to read his work as part of a nationalistic, canon-defining project grounded in the analysis of a selection of texts by a small group of American writers who flourished in the 1850s.⁹⁹ As Jonathan Arac has contended, Matthiessen’s major work, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941), has assumed a notoriously nationalistic position in the history of American literary criticism, despite Matthiessen’s original intentions.¹⁰⁰ However, as Elaine Tyler May has summarised:

The American Renaissance [...] is often cast as one of those [critical texts] responsible for establishing a literary canon limited to White male Protestants of the New England tradition. Often overlooked is the radicalism of Matthiessen’s life and work. Matthiessen, a committed socialist, worked inside and outside the academy to understand and improve the lives of American workers. His fascination with Melville’s *Moby-Dick* stemmed from his reading of the Pequod as America writ small, with its ethnic and racial diversity, its obsessive capitalist tyranny, and the inability of the oppressed crew to rebel. Like other reformers and intellectuals of the pre-World War II years, he considered industrial capitalism to be hostile to democracy. Carrying this vision into politics, Matthiessen supported the radical labor movement, and after World War II he became a major critic of the cold war.¹⁰¹

It is this view of Matthiessen as a critic for whom literary, cultural, and social criticism are inextricably linked, that comes across most strongly in his essay on Yeats in the 1941 Yeats Memorial Issue of *The Southern Review*.

Matthiessen emphasises Yeats’s sense of “tragic failure,” which he reads in terms of the Anglo-Irish poet’s belief in the inevitable failure of all idealistic political

endeavour: the dream of “cultural wholeness,” he argues, is not “possible of fulfillment.” Matthiessen links the universal desire for “unity of being” to a nation’s pursuit of “unity of culture” which he suggests Yeats realised was unobtainable. Considering Yeats’s late disillusionment with the failure of his efforts to create a truly revitalised sense of Irish culture through the formation of the National Theatre, Matthiessen writes:

Just as an individual strives for “unity of being,” so does a society strive for “unity of culture,” and Yeats’s particular tragic sense came to maturity as he realized that the one could not be achieved without the other, that the individual must be very incomplete without social coherence to sustain him, and that his own dream for the cultural wholeness of Ireland, in which his theater could be a truly national theater as the Elizabethan theater had been, was not possible of fulfillment.¹⁰²

Read in terms of his general disavowal of cultural isolationism, Matthiessen’s description of the ultimate disappointment of Yeats’s “dream for the cultural wholeness of Ireland” can be readily transposed onto the American context. In other words, his consideration of Yeats’s cultural politics enables Matthiessen to express a very subtle but nonetheless potent critique of mainstream American (isolationist) culture and politics.

(v)

Both Matthiessen and Schwartz, then, establish the example of Yeats in terms that signal their opposition to exceptionalist understandings of (American) literary culture. Their readings of Yeats’s achievement, however, are less significant for what they tell us about Yeats, than for the insight they provide into the way that Yeats was read by American critics and poets who were opposed to the drive towards cultural isolation in the 1940s. For writers such as Schwartz, Matthiessen, and Berryman, the figure of Yeats represented a necessarily bifurcated cultural ontology: by accepting Yeats’s example, American poets acknowledged the cultural “other,” in an inter-national gesture that opposed the exceptionalist myth of national wholeness. From this summary of their contributions to the 1941 Yeats Memorial Issue of *The Southern Review*, it is clear that a significant gulf existed between the Southern Agrarian “close readers” and the more

contextualist members of the “Pound-Eliot-Richards gang” at Harvard, camps represented by Ransom and Tate on the one hand, and by Schwartz and Matthiessen on the other.

Given his enthusiastic appraisal of Yeats’s importance as a European writer, it is no surprise that Schwartz would later become an editor of the *Partisan Review*, whose editorial team during the post-war period James Atlas has described as “vigorous proponents of the idea—perhaps the most powerful idea of the last half-century,” claimed Irving Howe—that Europe was the creative citadel of modern literature.”¹⁰³ Berryman’s agreement with this attitude is suggested by his intense engagement with Yeats and other European figures (from Auden to Pirandello) in his early work. It is also expressed in clear and unambiguous terms in the unpublished essay “The American Intellectual and the American Dream,” where American authority is rejected not only for its “failure-in-regard-to-Spain” but more generally because of what Berryman perceived as the “existence here of an organized and powerful anti-intellectual culture.” Disaffected from American cultural authority, Berryman and others of his generation (including Schwartz) turned towards Europe—and frequently to Yeats—to seek a replacement for what they felt was lacking at home. As Schwartz puts it in one of his (posthumously published) poems:

This is the greatest thing in North America:
Europe is the greatest thing in North America!
High in the sky, dark in the heart, and always there
Among the natural powers of sunlight and air,
Changing, second by second, shifting and changing the light,
Bring fresh rain to the stone of the library steps.¹⁰⁴

Schwartz’s celebration of European literature and culture can be read in terms of Berryman’s conception of “the politics of praise” as an ideologically astute rebuttal of the exceptionalist rhetoric of mainstream American culture.

In *The Dream Songs* Berryman wrote “one solid block of agony” (*DS* 157) for Schwartz, and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (Books IV to VII of *The Dream Songs*) is dedicated to Mark Van Doren and to Schwartz’s “sacred memory”. The sense of identification between Berryman and Schwartz, while it has often been described by commentators in terms of their shared childhood experiences of loss and later emotional and psychiatric problems,¹⁰⁵ can also be explained by referring to the interrogation of American authority in their work. Berryman’s awareness of what he termed “the politics of praise” signalled his critical engagement with aspects of mainstream isolationist American culture that Schwartz—“the laureate of the Atlantic”¹⁰⁶—sought to undermine by reinforcing the historical bond between American and Europe in his poetry and critical writings. “Carefully we choose / Our fathers,” Berryman writes in “Desire Is a World by Night,” suggesting that his choice of Yeats as a source of poetic authority at the start of his career was both deliberate and planned. His choice of a European figure, however, was also bound up with his rejection of American authority. The site of Berryman’s engagement with Yeats, then, frequently described as the main starting-point for a discussion of his (Berryman’s) poetic development, can also be considered as an important point-of-departure for a description of his largely undervalued cultural politics. The consequences of that engagement, moreover, may be traced throughout a career that was foreshortened not only by the fact of Berryman’s suicide in 1972, but in more recent times by the failure of Berryman criticism to either address or advance the dominant perception of him as a poet of centripetal confession and avoidance.

3. "Having it out with the majestic Shade"

The desire to be elsewhere, to get away, to move abroad, is found everywhere in Berryman's poetry. It is a sense of flight that is summarised in the following lines from an unfinished (and unpublished) Dream Song fragment: "I love my country. I love it all the way / fr[om] 5th & Hennepin to the airport."¹⁰⁷ Berryman does not reveal much about his reasons for moving to Ireland in 1966 in this fragment,¹⁰⁸ but the fragment nonetheless signals his long and difficult relationship with the United States and American authority, which is embodied in his poetry's recurring figurations of displacement. One of the most memorable examples of this in Berryman's work is the description of his move to Dublin in Dream Song 312, which begins:

I have moved to Dublin to have it out with you,
majestic Shade, You whom I read so well
so many years ago,
did I read your lesson right? did I see through
your phases to the real? your heaven, your hell
did I enquire properly into?

On one level, this Dream Song tells of Berryman's decision to cross the Atlantic with his family in 1966 to live in Ireland. Berryman had been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in March of that year and decided, after some initial uncertainty, to spend it in Dublin. Berryman won the Pulitzer Prize in 1965 for *77 Dream Songs* (1964) and, together with the financial assistance of the Guggenheim, he resolved to finish his long poem of nearly a decade's labour in Dublin. As he put it in Dream Song 379:

To the edge of Europe, the eighteenth edge,
the ancient edge, Henry sailed full of thought
and rich with high-wrought designs,
for a tranquil mind & to fulfil a pledge
he gave himself to end a labour

Berryman did not end the "labour" of writing Dream Songs in Dublin, however, and the matter of just *when*—or *if*—Berryman completed his long poem before his death is in itself a difficult question to answer.

It is common for critics to assume that the figure of the “majestic Shade” in Dream Song 312 refers to Yeats, and for it to be cited as evidence of Berryman’s Oedipal struggle with the Anglo-Irish poet. Sean Ryder, for example, has suggested not only that “Yeats functions as a poetic ‘father’ in the Songs,” but that “the city of Dublin in Book VII, in fact, becomes the site of an Oedipal struggle”¹⁰⁹. The final lines of Dream Song 312, however, suggest a greater degree of magnanimity between the American poet and his esteemed “precursor” than is granted by neo-Freudian models of literary engagement. Although it begins with what is often read as an expression of Oedipal conflict, Berryman describes a very peaceable sense of his relationship with Yeats in the Song’s closing lines:

Your high figures float
again across my mind and all your past
fills my walled garden with your honey breath
wherein I move, a mote.

The broad psychoanalytical framework suggested for reading Dream Song 312 is complicated by the Song’s ending, which is certainly more ambiguous than Ryder’s description of it in terms of outright “Oedipal struggle.”

A clarification of the meaning of Berryman’s “having it out” with the “majestic Shade” is suggested by a passage from Saul Bellow’s novel *Herzog*, first published in 1964, and which Berryman would almost certainly have read—and possibly before its publication date—given his long friendship and working relationship with Bellow at the University of Minnesota during the 1950s. In *Herzog* Bellow describes Moses Herzog, “Late in Spring [...] overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends.”¹¹⁰ Berryman’s move to Dublin “to have it out” (with Yeats) might then be read as having more to do with putting things in perspective and clarifying his relationship with his precursor than with any sense of literary patricide or Oedipal quarrelling. On the one hand, Berryman does seem to be “making amends”

with the “majestic Shade”: he writes, “For years then I forgot you, I put you down”. On the other hand, however, he suggests that the “majestic Shade” never left him, and that the figure of Yeats—and Yeats’s figures—have always been present to his work. The latter point is suggested in Dream Song 313, for example, where Berryman writes of the pervasiveness (“the all-enclosing wind”) of Yeats and his figures, adding “The whole place is ghostly”.

If Berryman *did* “forget” Yeats in the two decades between the publication of *The Dispossessed* and *The Dream Songs*, then, he did not forget the kinds of ideological issues (“the politics of praise”) that informed his turn towards Yeats as a young writer of the “Euro-cultural dispensation.” The ideological potency of Berryman’s poetry (early and late) is often underestimated, but it was not lost on Delmore Schwartz, for example, who warned Berryman in 1943 to keep his “pamphlet [*Poems* (1942)] out of sight, for it does not seem to show you as a good loyal American”¹¹¹, when he (Berryman) was seeking work in the State Department. Schwartz was clearly referring to poems such as “River Rouge, 1932” and “Thanksgiving: Detroit” which expose Berryman as a critic of capitalist America, but he may have had other poems in mind also, such as “The Statue” and “The Moon and the Night and the Men,” which display Berryman’s distance from the poetics (and politics) of the “Whitman-Williams isolationist” mode. It is highly unlikely, of course, that officials of the State Department would have interpreted Berryman’s borrowings from Yeats as a threat to the national security. At the same time, it is easy to forget that Berryman started his career at a time of great national anxiety, paranoia, and intense self-reflection in the United States—as illustrated by Schwartz’s remarks.

Taken at face value, Dream Song 312 suggests that Berryman abandoned, forgot, and even “put [Yeats] down” following the publication of *The Dispossessed* in 1948, and subsequently throughout the culturally paranoid years of the 1950s. If Yeats’s formal

influence is difficult to discern in his middle and late work, however, it is possible to trace the consequences of Berryman's initial ideological encounter and engagement with the Anglo-Irish poet through all stages of his development. *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, for example, is a poem that deals in a very profound way with the crisis in the American conception of self that the Cold War revealed and accentuated. Moreover, the critical failure to recognise the complex "Euro-centric" (and therefore anti-isolationist) attitude of this poem, is symptomatic of a Cold War desire to read American cultural production as part of a program of national self-definition and reinforcement. What was universally applauded as a great *American* poem when it was first published in 1953 also describes Berryman's sense of alienation from American society and culture, as well as his undertaking to "refound" a sense of cultural identity in expansive (inter-national) terms that was signalled—in the first instance—by his turn towards Yeats at the start of his career. When *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* was finally published in book form in 1956, with illustrations by the left-wing artist Ben Shahn, very few critics commented on the collaboration. Similarly, critics have generally overlooked the sometimes oblique but nonetheless prescient political and ideological engagement of Berryman's later poetry.

In her account of American "literature as radical statement" after World War II in the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), Catherine R. Stimpson writes that:

A conventional account of contemporary American culture professes that literature as radical statement did not exist in the 1940s and 1950s. Then, in the 1960s, revolutionary texts exploded, to falter into ashy rumours and obsolete mumbles in the 1970s and 1980s. The myth is partly true. The fiery writing of the 1960s did cry out for revolution, not reform. [...]

However, the myth is only partly true. For some writers in the late 1940s and the 1950s prepared the ground, not only for the radical right, but for the opposing literatures of the 1960s.¹¹²

Stimpson examines the claim that the 1960s saw a proliferation of writers concerned with issues of race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, nature and ecology, and she

suggests that many of those literary “movements” can be traced back to the radical poetics of the 1940s and earlier. Similarly, Cary Nelson has provided comprehensive evidence to show that American poetry of the period between 1910 and 1945 was replete with writers of politically and poetically radical and innovative work, ranging from Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein to H. H. Lewis and Langston Hughes.¹¹³ Moreover, Nelson argues that narratives of American literary history have traditionally required “a whole series of fragmentations, repressions, and redefinitions,” strategies of evasion that reflect a range of “highly interested interpretive moves” by which the presence of particular authors and texts may be undervalued or ignored for one reason or another by ideologically motivated literary critics and historians.¹¹⁴ This process of evasion, Nelson suggests, may account for the fact that “when Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, among others, appear[ed], they need[ed] to be contained within autobiographical confession, their interests in history and sexual difference turned back on themselves rather than outward on American culture.”¹¹⁵

The “others” referred to by Nelson include John Berryman; and while his point regarding the general critical failure to appreciate the so-called Confessional poets’ turn “outward on American culture” has especial relevance for this study’s consideration of Berryman’s later poetry, it may also be argued that his poetry of the 1940s “prepared the ground,” to use Stimpson’s phrase, for the interrogation of American culture that was a central concern in his writing throughout a career spanning more than thirty years. Dream Song 312 clearly can be read in (auto)biographical terms as a description of Berryman’s transatlantic pilgrimage, undertaken in 1966, to visit “the haunts of Yeats / & others” (*DS* 281), but the engagement with the “majestic Shade” might also be interpreted in terms of a career-long dialogue with European culture undertaken by Berryman at least in part as a consequence of his early rejection of American authority. To insist on reading Dream Song 312, and Berryman’s engagement with Yeats in

general, in terms of Oedipal conflict, is to undervalue the importance of the consequences of that engagement, and to ignore completely what Berryman termed “the politics of praise.” In the first paragraph of his lecture on “Cross-fertilization in International Poetry” in 1959 Berryman stated that:

The word ‘influence’ itself is unsatisfactory [...] for our purposes. It is a vague word, at best, and not active enough for what I have in mind, which is more basically formative, genetic, inspirational, something indeed almost indispensable. I wish we had a word for this, but I have not been able to think of one; if one occurs to any of you I should be very glad to hear of it.¹¹⁶

Berryman’s dissatisfaction with narrow conceptions of poetic influence applies to his own work, and to analyses of his engagement with Yeats in particular, which was “formative” in more than formal terms and may be considered as an important and indeed fundamental aspect of Berryman’s career-long critique of American authority. An exposition of that critique is the main objective of the following chapters.

Notes

¹ John Berryman, “Cross-fertilization in International Poetry,” Unpublished Non-fiction Prose, Box 1, File 22, JBP. Drafts and notes for this lecture exist both in manuscript and unpaginated typescript versions in the John Berryman Papers, but a “final” draft does not exist.

² Berryman, “The American Intellectual and the American Dream,” Unpublished Non-fiction Prose, Box 1, File 2, JBP. See Appendix 1.

³ Randall Jarrell, “Verse Chronicle,” *Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews 1935-1964* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980) 151-53; 153.

⁴ Jarrell 153.

⁵ Steven Matthews, *Yeats as Precursor: Readings in Irish, British, and American Poetry* (London and New York: Macmillan, 2000) 168.

⁶ Malcolm Bradbury, *The Expatriate Tradition in American Literature*. BAAS Pamphlets in American Studies 9 (Tyne and Wear: British Association for American Studies, 1982) 7.

⁷ Edward Engelberg, *The Vast Design: Patterns in W. B. Yeats’s Aesthetic*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988) 210.

⁸ Karl Shapiro, foreword, *Letters of Delmore Schwartz*, ed. Robert Phillips (Princeton, NJ: Ontario University Press, 1984) xi-xiii; xi.

⁹ Berryman, see Appendix 1.

¹⁰ R. P. Blackmur, "The American Literary Expatriate," *The Lion and the Honeycomb: Essays in Solitude and Critique* (London: Methuen, 1956) 61-78; 61.

¹¹ Blackmur 68, 71.

¹² Blackmur 71.

¹³ Berryman, see Appendix 1.

¹⁴ Blackmur 75.

¹⁵ W. B. Yeats, "Away," *Uncollected Prose of W. B. Yeats*, eds. John P. Frayne and Colton Johnson, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976) 267-82.

¹⁶ Terence Diggory, "American Poets' Responses to Yeats's Prose: Marianne Moore and Allen Ginsberg," in George Bornstein and Richard J. Finneran, eds. *Yeats and Modern Poetry* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985) 34-59; 34. Special Issue of *Yeats: An Annual of Textual and Critical Studies* 3 (1985).

¹⁷ See Richard J. Kelly, *John Berryman's Personal Library: A Catalogue* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999) 406.

¹⁸ See, for example, Deirdre Toomey, "Away," *Yeats Annual* 10 (1993): 3-33, and Terence Brown, *The Life of W. B. Yeats: A Critical Biography* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999) 15-21. See also, Warwick Gould, John Kelly, and Deirdre Toomey, eds. *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats, 1896-1900*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 246n2 and 248-49.

¹⁹ Brown 172.

²⁰ Yeats, *Uncollected Prose* 267.

²¹ W. B. Yeats, "High Talk," *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, 2nd ed. (1991; London: Macmillan, 1993) 343.

²² Hermann Hesse, "Ich Weiss, Du Gehst," *Poems*, trans. James Wright (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970) 2-3.

²³ Berryman, "Cross-fertilization in International Poetry," n. pag.

²⁴ Berryman, "Cross-fertilization in International Poetry," n. pag. Berryman's emphasis.

²⁵ Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1996) 31.

²⁶ Berryman, see Appendix 1.

²⁷ Lipset 31.

²⁸ W. B. Yeats, letter to Richard Ashe King, 5 August 1897, in Gould, Kelly, and Toomey 129-31; 131.

²⁹ Berryman, [notes for a lecture on W. B. Yeats], Unpublished Non-Fiction Prose, Box 2, JBP.

³⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981) 79.

³¹ Quoted in Lipset 18.

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- ³² John Bayley, "John Berryman: A Question of Imperial Sway," *John Berryman: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989) 71-88; 78.
- ³³ Bayley 78.
- ³⁴ Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (1981; London: Faber and Faber, 1999) 10.
- ³⁵ Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, eds. *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991) 3-36.
- ³⁶ Clayton and Rothstein 5.
- ³⁷ Ihab H. Hassan, "The Problem of Influence in Literary History: Notes Toward a Definition," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 14 (1955): 66-76. Göran Hermerén, *Influence in Art and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).
- ³⁸ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); *Kaballah and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); *Poetry and Repression* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1976). A bibliography of Bloom's works is provided in Graham Allen, *Harold Bloom: The Poetics of Conflict* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994).
- ³⁹ Peter de Bolla, *Harold Bloom: Towards Historical Rhetorics* (London: Routledge, 1988) 16.
- ⁴⁰ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace, 1994) 8.
- ⁴¹ Bloom, *The Western Canon* 8.
- ⁴² For an example of the "application" of Bloom's theory of literary influence see Bernard McGuirk, "On Misreading Mallarmé: The Resistance to Modernity," *Literary Theory and Poetry: Extending the Canon*, ed. David Murray (London: B. T. Batsford, 1989) 157-70.
- ⁴³ Clayton and Rothstein 8.
- ⁴⁴ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (1981; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983) 108-9.
- ⁴⁵ Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1988) 158-59.
- ⁴⁶ Lentricchia 158-59.
- ⁴⁷ James Longenbach, *Modern Poetry after Modernism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- ⁴⁸ Longenbach 20.
- ⁴⁹ Berryman, "Cross-fertilization in International Poetry," n. pag. Berryman's emphasis.
- ⁵⁰ Berryman, "Cross-fertilization in International Poetry," n. pag.
- ⁵¹ Bloom, *The Western Canon* 548.
- ⁵² Lentricchia 158-59.

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- ⁵³ Philip Larkin, "A Neglected Responsibility: Contemporary Literary Manuscripts," *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1966-1982* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1983) 98-108; 99.
- ⁵⁴ Charles Rosen, "The Ruins of Walter Benjamin," *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith (1988; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991) 129-75; 172.
- ⁵⁵ Paul A. Bové, *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) 10.
- ⁵⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History," *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983) 235-56; 240.
- ⁵⁷ Philip McGowan, "Fog People: The (Non-)Identity of the Alcohol Dependent in U.S. Literary and Cultural Representations, 1826-1988," diss., Dublin University, Trinity College, 1995, 1.
- ⁵⁸ Byron E. Shafer, introduction, *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) vi.
- ⁵⁹ Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) 1.
- ⁶⁰ Stephen Matterson, "Tenth-Muse-ism, Or, The Discontinuity of American Poetry," *Living with America, 1946-1996*, eds. Rob Kroes and Cristina Giorelli (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1997) 267-73. Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961; rpt. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987). Albert Gelpi, *The Tenth Muse: The Psyche of the American Poet* (1975; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
- ⁶¹ David Ignatow, foreword, Pearce vii-viii; vii.
- ⁶² Matterson 268.
- ⁶³ Matterson 268.
- ⁶⁴ Robert A. Divine, *The Sputnik Challenge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) xvi.
- ⁶⁵ Gelpi ix.
- ⁶⁶ See, for example, Justin Quinn, "Europe in the Work of Anthony Hecht and James Merrill," *Irish Journal of American Studies* 5 (1996): 107-118.
- ⁶⁷ Emerson, "The American Scholar," *Essays and Lectures* 53-71; 70.
- ⁶⁸ Bradbury 8.
- ⁶⁹ Berryman, "Provincial," rev. of *The Last of the Provincials: The American Novel*, by Maxwell Geismar, *Partisan Review* 3 (March 1948): 379-81; 382.
- ⁷⁰ Cited in Denis Donoghue, "America in Theory," *Reading America: Essays on American Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988) 3-19; 15.
- ⁷¹ Donoghue 15.
- ⁷² Berryman, [Obituary for W. B. Yeats], Unpublished Non-fiction Prose, Box 2, JBP.
- ⁷³ Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (1941; Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979) 1.
- ⁷⁴ T. S. Eliot, "Yeats," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975) 248-57; 257.
- ⁷⁵ Eliot 251.

⁷⁶ Eliot 257.

⁷⁷ MacNeice 226.

⁷⁸ Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (1948; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987) vii.

⁷⁹ Berryman, "A Note on Yeats Just Now, Or, Homage to Macmillan," Unpublished Non-fiction Prose, Box 2, File 64, JBP.

⁸⁰ Berryman, unpublished Letter to A. J. Putnam, 16 April 1939, Unpublished Non-fiction Prose, Box 2, JBP.

⁸¹ *The Southern Review* 7.3 (Winter 1941). Subsequent references to this issue of *The Southern Review* will be abbreviated *JR* and followed by the relevant page number(s).

⁸² Charlotte H. Beck, "'Solely *The Southern Review*': A Significant Moment in the Poetic Apprenticeship of John Berryman," *Recovering Berryman: Essays on a Poet*, eds. Richard J. Kelly and Alan K. Lathrop (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993) 113-24; 122.

⁸³ John Crowe Ransom, "The Irish, the Gaelic, the Byzantine," *JR* 517-46; 527.

⁸⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994) 49.

⁸⁵ Allen Tate, "Yeats's Romanticism: Notes and Suggestions," *JR* 591-600.

⁸⁶ *JR* 591.

⁸⁷ *JR* 592.

⁸⁸ *JR* 600.

⁸⁹ Delmore Schwartz, "An Unwritten Book," *JR* 471-91; F. O. Matthiessen, "The Crooked Road," *JR* 455-70.

⁹⁰ *JR* 472.

⁹¹ *JR* 474.

⁹² *JR* 475.

⁹³ *JR* 474.

⁹⁴ *JR* 477.

⁹⁵ Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (1931; London: The Fontana Library, 1969).

⁹⁶ Robert Frost, *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Wilson, 1963) 277.

⁹⁷ Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (1977; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) 231.

⁹⁸ F. O. Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948) 24.

⁹⁹ Sacvan Bercovitch has written of Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* that it "set the terms for discussing the American literary tradition; it provided a canon of classical texts; and it inspired the growth of American literary studies in the United States and abroad." He also argues that *American Renaissance* was an important part of a process of legitimation which "may be traced in

America's emergence, between World War I and World War II, as the major capitalist power, or in Cold War terms of the late Forties, the leader of the Free World." See Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) 353-54. Bercovitch's suggestion that Matthiessen advocated the Cold War politics of isolation and expurgation is not beyond dispute. Matthiessen was decidedly internationalist in his cultural politics and what Jonathan Arac has described as the "emphatically international undertaking" of *American Renaissance* destabilises the suggestion that Matthiessen was an advocate of exceptionalist ideology. See Jonathan Arac, "F. O. Matthiessen: Authorizing an American Renaissance," *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, eds. Walter Benn Michaels and Donald A. Pease (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) 90-112.

¹⁰⁰ Arac argues that Matthiessen's work has been "appropriated in ways contrary to his intentions." Particularly striking, Arac contends, "is the nationalist force achieved by Matthiessen's emphatically international undertaking." Arac 91.

¹⁰¹ Elaine Tyler May, "The Radical Roots of American Studies': Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 9, 1995," *American Quarterly* 48.2 (June 1996): 179-200; 182.

¹⁰² SR 467.

¹⁰³ James Atlas, *Bellow* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) 71.

¹⁰⁴ Delmore Schwartz, "The Greatest Thing in North America," *Last & Lost Poems*, ed. Robert Phillips (1979; New York: New Directions, 1989) 21.

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, Bruce Bawer, *The Middle Generation: The Lives and Poetry of Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1986).

¹⁰⁶ "America, America!", Schwartz 4.

¹⁰⁷ Berryman, ["I love my country"], Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, JBP.

¹⁰⁸ For a more detailed discussion of Berryman's decision to move to Ireland in 1966, see Philip Coleman, " 'What am I myself here doing?': Revisiting Henry in Dublin," *Thumbscrew* 15 (Winter/Spring 2000): 11-16.

¹⁰⁹ Sean Ryder, "Annotations to John Berryman's Dream Songs," diss. University College Dublin, 1989, 119.

¹¹⁰ Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (1964; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996) 2.

¹¹¹ Phillips 179-80. Berryman's pamphlet *Poems* (CP 278-82) was published as part of a series of pamphlets by James Laughlin's New Directions press in 1942, shortly before Berryman's twenty-eighth birthday.

¹¹² Catherine R. Stimpson, "Literature as Radical Statement," *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, ed. Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 1060-76; 1063.

¹¹³ Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

¹¹⁴ Nelson 165-66.

¹¹⁵ Nelson 166.

¹¹⁶ Berryman, "Cross-fertilization in International Poetry," n. pag.

CHAPTER 2

WRITING *THE DECADE OF SURVIVAL*:

THE DISPOSSESSED AND *BERRYMAN'S SONNETS*, 1938-48

Particularly because I used the poem as title-piece for a book, I have been sensitive since (as indeed I was long before) to the word 'dispossessed'; and there can be no harm in saying here that I have come on it not dozens but hundreds of times used in the specifically emphatic—central way I tried myself to achieve. The concept reaches deep into modern agony.

(John Berryman)¹

For I am the penal colony's prime scribe:
From solitary, firing against the tribe
Uncanny judgments ancient and unclean.

(CP 107)

Regarding the reception of Philip Larkin's debut collection of poems *The North Ship* (1945), Andrew Motion has written that it is "easy to regret that so much attention has been paid to its style and so little to its themes"². The same might be said of the critical appraisal of Berryman's early poetry: a great deal of attention has been paid to the formal or stylistic influence of Yeats and Auden, but the work's broader concerns and engagements—including its treatment of the impact of the Holocaust and the advent of the Atomic Age on modern consciousness, as well as what Berryman's editor Helen Stewart discerned as the "imaginative transformations of modern American life"³ in many of the poems of his first major collection—have been generally disregarded in Berryman criticism. Despite the fact that a contemporary reviewer of *The Dispossessed* felt that "Mr. Berryman does illuminate contemporary America for us,"⁴ relatively little attention has been paid to the ways that his early poetry sheds light on the experience of living in the United States during a period he termed "the decade of Survival."⁵ Advancing the previous chapter's reading of his early turn towards Yeats in terms of his

rejection of American authority, this chapter reassesses the extent of Berryman's political engagements in *The Dispossessed* and *Berryman's Sonnets*, and presses for a reappraisal of their place in the Berryman canon by preparing the ground for his later work's ideological interventions.

1. "The Decade of Survival"

(i)

Having spent the previous two years studying at Cambridge University, England, Berryman arrived back in the United States on June 21, 1938. More than thirty years later he would draw on the experiences of his first transatlantic trip to describe "the strange Old World" towards which he set sail in September 1936, to "pick [the] brains" of its great writers and to "visit by hook or crook with W. B. Yeats." (CP 188) On one level the poem "Away" recalls the sense of naïve excitement with which Berryman set out on his first pilgrimage for Cambridge and the Old World:

Ah! So very slowly
the jammed dock slides away backward,
I'm on my way to Bumpus' & the Cam,
haunts of old masters where I may improve.

Now we're swinging round, tugs hoot,
I don't think I was ever better pleased
with the outspread opening world & even myself
O when *The Nation* took my epitaph.

(CP 189)

The "outspread opening world" anticipated by the speaker in "Away" in 1936, however, underwent unforeseeable transformations in the decade that followed. Berryman himself witnessed the sinister changes that were taking place in Europe in July 1937 when, with his fiancée Beryl Eeman, he observed the increasing might of the Nazi military machine while on holiday in Heidelberg, Germany. In a letter written before he travelled to Germany, he cautioned his mother not to "*mention politics in letters*" which she would

address to him at the American Express in Heidelberg.⁶ In the same letter he asked her to “pray for [their] safety among the Nazis.” Berryman would later attempt to write about the horrors inflicted by the Nazis upon the Polish people in an unfinished poem entitled “The Black Book,” three sections of which were published in the chapbook *His Thought Made Pockets & the Plane Bucket* in 1958 (CP 154-6), but John Haffenden has written that although “German nationalism was heavy in the air, flags and troops everywhere, and boys who looked hardly older than fourteen bore rifles with bayonets on their bicycles,” Berryman returned to Cambridge after that vacation “more hopeful of value, human and creative” than ever before.⁷ That optimism was short-lived, however, and not long after Berryman returned to the United States in 1938 he realised that in many ways life would never be the same again; he was returning to face what he would subsequently describe as “the decade of Survival.”

Berryman had been undeniably, and to some of his friends intolerably, affected by his stint abroad. E. M. (“Milt”) Halliday, one of Berryman’s old Columbia University friends, was in New York to greet him on his return and, in his memoir *John Berryman and the Thirties* (1987), he scarcely disguises how disappointed he felt on first encountering his recently “anglicized” friend:

At that moment, far down the now almost deserted pier, we saw a lone figure approaching slowly, ambling along with a rolled-up umbrella in one hand and a book in the other, head tilted slightly to one side, eyeglasses glinting at us between the shadow of a slouch hat and a heavy growth of red beard. Mrs. Berryman [the poet’s mother] grasped my arm tightly. “Can that possibly be . . .” The figure drew near. “I say,” said John’s voice, “have you been waiting long?”⁸

Halliday goes on to note that “in less than two years John had almost completely anglicized his speech—that is as far as he was able.”⁹ Berryman’s return to New York, then, was something of an anti-climactic homecoming. Not only he did he quickly discover that his old friends were scornful of his new ways; more seriously, he was soon to learn that he would need more than a Cambridge degree if he was to find work in a

city whose “job atmosphere [...] was still that of the Depression.”¹⁰ This is one of the most frequently overlooked facts where a consideration of the immediate context to Berryman’s early work is concerned: the fact that he was, for the greater part of the 1940s especially, either unemployed or just barely holding down a part-time job teaching somewhere.

In one of the lowest points of his career Berryman worked for a period as a salesman for *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in New York in 1943. It was not until 1946, when he was appointed Associate in Creative Writing at Princeton University, that he was in “secure” employment. Moreover, it was not until 1955—at the age of 41—when he was appointed a lecturer in Humanities at the University of Minnesota, that Berryman had any real kind of job security, and even that post was often held through uncertain times. To engage another critic’s rather misguided wisdom, it might well have been the case that Berryman and many of his peers found themselves playing an enforced “game of poetical chairs” during this period,¹¹ but this was a fact of life in what were economically precarious times. This needs to be kept in mind when considering the immediate socio-economic conditions that foreground Berryman’s early work. Berryman’s letters to his mother from this period are strewn with references to the difficult financial circumstances he often had to endure, such as the rather depressed relief with which he greeted a cheque for \$8.50 from the *New York Herald Tribune* in June 1939, when he wrote:

An \$8.50 cheque turned up from *Books* the other day, but I didn’t send it up because I already owed Aunt Ethel three dollars (my correspondence is proving rather expensive but it’s necessary) and am using the rest for our day-to-day expenses, largely stamps and tobacco. I’ll be glad to see the Columbia salary begin.¹²

The “Columbia salary” did not “begin,” however, because Berryman would later find out that his “precious university”¹³ did not want to employ him after all. His letters from this period are not only peppered with accounts of a frequently penniless existence, but

details of job applications, and rejections to those applications, also dominate many of the letters from this time.

Although he was more privileged than many, Berryman had first-hand experience of the difficulties that overshadowed American social and economic life through the 1930s and into the 1940s. That Berryman spent a formative two years studying at Cambridge University on a Euretta J. Kellett Scholarship from 1936-38 often distracts readers of his early work from this important fact. Given his background and his family's particular experience of the Depression, Berryman could seldom take privilege for granted for very long. He did not come from a wealthy background, like his contemporary Robert Lowell for example, whose family—though his father came from the “poor (i.e. the merely comfortably off) branch of the Lowells”¹⁴—held considerable social standing. Berryman biographers John Haffenden and Paul Mariani have both suggested that the suicide of the poet's natural father John Allyn Smith, in Tampa, Florida in June 1926, was probably precipitated by his failure in business and the accrual of losses as a result of the crash of the Florida land boom that year. Berryman's parents had no impressive network of cousins and uncles to fall back on when things went wrong. Between the age of two and twelve, because of the precariousness of his parents' finances, Berryman lived in no fewer than five American towns and cities (McAlester, Sasakwa, Anadarko, and Lamar in Oklahoma and Tampa in Florida), and the pattern of domestic instability (similar in some ways to that experienced by W. B. Yeats) continued throughout the poet's teenage years, and well into his adult life.

In “The American Intellectual and the American Dream” Berryman wrote that “The country was raw when I was born in 1914, and not less so when we left [Oklahoma] in 1926 for the mad real estate boom and crash of Florida, and I have never been back nor met since anyone I knew there.”¹⁵ Robert Giroux, in an attempt to have the early period of Berryman's life and the suspicious circumstances surrounding his

father's death re-examined, has suggested that Berryman's father did not in fact commit suicide, and that he may have been murdered by the poet's mother, Martha ("Jill") Smith, later Berryman.¹⁶ Giroux claims that Berryman "actually confronted his mother and accused her of having murdered his father."¹⁷ Berryman makes no such direct accusations in his poetry, however, although he recalls the summer of his father's death in "Tampa Stomp," which was published in *Delusions Etc.* (1972). The references in that poem to "[t]he death of the boom" and "the city reek[ing] of failure" clearly pertain to the end of the Florida land boom in 1926. (CP 247-8) While "Tampa Stomp" describes something of the poet's traumatic upbringing and the events of June 1926, however, Berryman's poem also relates to a broader context of economic difficulty and crisis that, where the development of his career as a writer is concerned, may be considered in terms of what Frank Lentricchia has proposed as "the definition of modern American poetry demanded by its economic circumstances [...]: the craft of nonremunerative writing pursued by those who cannot afford to pursue the craft of nonremunerative writing."¹⁸

Although he could claim as much as \$1,000 for poetry readings by the end of his life, Berryman began his career as one of those who could barely "afford to pursue the craft of nonremunerative writing." Lentricchia argues that:

The American literary dream in the twentieth century is to reconcile aesthetic commitment and economic necessity beyond the storied opposition that had more or less inescapably haunted writers ever since the eighteenth century, the more or less of nightmare depending on the more or less of cash a writer might lay easy claim to from an inheritance, say, or possibly a patron. But where was an American writer going to find a patron? And how many American writers in the twentieth century inherited leisure-class conditions?¹⁹

Berryman had no "easy claim" to an inheritance, nor did he inherit "leisure-class conditions," and the point is significantly registered by the title and many of the poems of *The Dispossessed*. Although he began his literary career in the late 1930s with two years as a Kellett Scholar at Cambridge University to his credit, Berryman's poetry from this period is nonetheless concerned with an examination of the harsher social and domestic

realities he knew all too well during his youth, and continued to experience after he returned to the United States and in the difficult decade that followed. Eileen Simpson (Berryman's first wife) recalls that in the early 1940s Berryman was "a man on the run, pleading for one job after another for which he was unsuited by training and employment."²⁰ Without an inheritance and unable to find full-time employment, the decade following his return to the United States in 1938 was a period of manifold uncertainty for Berryman, and the reality of that situation is reflected by the pervasiveness of the theme of dispossession in its various forms in *The Dispossessed*. That reality, indeed, is summed up in the book's final poem, also the title-poem, where the reader is directed toward a locale of "empty houses where old things take place" (CP 67), troubled dwellings that exist both in the real world and in the precincts of the poet's mind.

(ii)

Berryman's understanding of dispossession is also reflected in his contribution to a symposium on "The State of American Writing" published in the *Partisan Review* in 1948 where, having made some prefatory remarks regarding "the sluggish influence of what is called the 'cold war'," he describes the previous ten years as "the decade of Survival."²¹ Berryman was not only referring to his own personal financial and domestic difficulties here: in the wake of the horrors of Auschwitz and in the advent of the Atomic Age the kind of survival at stake was not merely a matter of literary or artistic endurance. "Wider military operations," Berryman wrote, "their prolongation, their involvement of civilians, above all the preceding and accompanying genocide, distinguish wholly this war from the last. [...] There is a political, perhaps a moral, paralysis."²² As he puts it in "Rock-Study with Wanderer," written in 1947, "A paralysis / Is busy with societies and souls / Whose gnarled & pain-wild bodies beg abyss / Paraplegia dolorosa The world rolls". (CP 57) Given the backdrop of horror and war and the threat of imminent global slaughter,

Berryman's responses to questions concerning "The State of American Writing" are overshadowed by a deeper anxiety that reflects his concern for the fate of humanity and not merely for the fate of poetry or the individual poet. This is not to suggest that Berryman was not concerned about the fate of the poet, or with an understanding of the nature of his own poetic enterprise. More crucially, it means that his literary and artistic concerns were bound up with the more worldly realisation that "*Man* seems to be darkening himself." (CP 204)

Theodor Adorno, who was forced to leave Germany because of his Jewish background in 1934 after the Nazi accession to power the previous year, famously expressed the view that "it has become impossible to write poetry today" in his 1951 essay, "Cultural Criticism and Society." Adorno announced that: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."²³ Berryman's inability to complete a poem about the treatment of the Polish Jews in "The Black Book" bears out Adorno's remark to some extent, but the fact that Berryman and others eventually found the resources to record the horrors of their time problematizes Adorno's claim. Indeed, as Brian O'Connor has summarised, Adorno later revised his claim regarding the barbarism of writing poetry after the Holocaust, and in his essay "Lyric Poetry and Society" (1957) he argued that, "the lyric poem is not, as a conservative interpretation might see it, the veneration of a pure and innocent environment." Rather, "it is an implicit criticism of a world in which experience of things is reduced to reification and categorical subsumption."²⁴ Adorno, in other words, proposed an understanding of (lyric) poetry that reads its apparent inwardness as a reflection of "the loneliness of an alienated world, a rejection of collectivity."²⁵

In his contribution to the *Partisan Review* symposium on "The State of American Writing," Berryman wrote that "Few men of reflection can be satisfied now with their actions and attitudes during the recent war."²⁶ Moreover, in a moment of clear self-

criticism, he argued that “few men of reflection can be satisfied with their actions and attitudes *now*.”²⁷ According to Berryman, there was an urgent need for poets and other critics of culture to re-appropriate their role within society in an attempt to counteract the moral and political “paralysis” he believed was taking hold of American society, and which (since the introduction of the Truman Doctrine in 1947) was threatening to silence poets and artists altogether by reducing the matter of individual and artistic expression to questions of national loyalty.²⁸ The Truman Doctrine was one of the cornerstones in the development of Cold War isolationist ideology and it increased the sense of disaffection towards mainstream authority felt by Berryman and others at the time. Reiterating an injunction made ten years earlier when he wrote that it is the poet’s duty “to prop your lids apart before / The midnight of the mind” (*CP* 278-9), Berryman argued that “Men who can think and are moral must stand ready night and day to the orders of blind evil”²⁹ in his contribution to the *Partisan Review* symposium. Although “The Dangerous Year” was written in 1939, Berryman’s call to poetic readiness and responsibility in that poem applies as well to his understanding of the Cold War problem of American social and cultural isolation and expurgation as it does to the imminent catastrophe of a decade earlier.

Against a contemporary “midnight of the mind” Berryman advised that “ ‘The writer should’ do any damned thing he can think of to keep on writing, writing well.”³⁰ Berryman’s use of the term “survival” echoes Auden’s poems “September 1, 1939” and “In Memory of W. B. Yeats.”³¹ In the latter poem Auden writes that “poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / In the valley of its saying [...]”³² In these lines, Auden considers the question of the relevance of art in a time of bleak social and political reality. The poem’s opening line—“He disappeared in the dead of Winter”—refers to much more than the fact that Yeats died in January. Auden’s description of “air-ports almost deserted,” and “public statues” “disfigured” by snow in the first section of his elegy for

Yeats suggests a more profoundly universal set of concerns. On first reading, Auden seems to suggest that poetry achieves nothing in times of crisis, that it “makes nothing happen.” In the second section of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” however, the “frozen” “brooks” of the “dark cold day” described in the first section have thawed into a living stream of words, “flow[ing] south / From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs, / Raw towns that we believe and die in”³³. Things gain momentum in the third and final section of the poem, where Yeats’s poetry is presented as a source of positive enrichment and Auden’s elegy ends by drawing an analogy between the importance of water for agricultural life and poetry for the well-being of a culture:

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress.

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.³⁴

As Samuel Hynes has written of this poem: “it rejects the idea of poetry as a mode of action [and] it proposes instead poetry as a mode of survival.”³⁵

In his elegy for Yeats, Auden writes that:

Time that with this strange excuse
Pardoned Kipling and his views,
And will pardon Paul Claudel,
Pardons him for writing well.³⁶

Hynes has argued that these lines refer less to the idea that “art is a value in itself, but rather that to write well *in such a time* is to preserve the human imagination, and thus to defend a human value against the forces of inhumanity.”³⁷ Like Auden, Berryman attempted to engage with a wide range of national and international, personal and political crises in his writings throughout the 1940s. These crises raised questions that frequently forced Berryman to re-appropriate his own sense of identity, not least in terms

of his relation to American culture but in more general terms also, concerning what Hynes has described as “the central critical question of the ’thirties: what relation can there be between art and life, or art and history, in a time of political crisis?”³⁸

In an important sense, the issue of the survival of Berryman’s early poetry against a largely negative critical reception is also at stake here, and among the most stringent in his dismissal of it is Philip Toynbee. Toynbee has written that Berryman’s “early verse was mellifluous, easy to understand and pleasing; but much of it is fairly obvious pastiche of other contemporaries; and it suffers from the fatal defect, as to survival, of being easy in sentiment as well as expression.”³⁹ While Berryman’s early work lacks the thematic range and technical complexity of his later work, however, it seems too easy for critics simply to dismiss Berryman’s poetry of the 1940s as a naïve young poet’s reaction to the tumultuous political atmosphere of the time. Like everyone else, Berryman was profoundly aware of what he later described as the “hysterical political atmosphere of the period” (*FP* 325), but to dismiss the social and political engagements of his early work as “easy in sentiment as well as expression” is to deny the contextual difficulties of its composition. Berryman’s “style,” moreover, marked as it clearly is by his turn towards the figure of Yeats at the beginning of his career, also embodies in its intertextual (and inter-national) expansiveness a critique of isolationist identity politics that has been thoroughly overlooked in Berryman studies. Considered formally *and* thematically, in other words, Berryman’s early poetry may be read in terms of Adorno’s belief that “the lyric poem is always an expression of a social antagonism.”⁴⁰

2. “In empty houses where old things take place”: *The Dispossessed*

(i)

While some critics have recognised Berryman’s engagement with modernity in general terms in his later work, the extent to which his early poetry is regarded as a record of his experience of the uncertain realities of this period in American social and cultural history has rarely been considered, or taken very seriously, in critical accounts. This is partly to do with the fact that many commentators of Berryman’s poetry express tacit agreement with Conrad Aiken’s view that the early poems are “diluted with *vin Audenaire*,”⁴¹ and that their social or political dimension is a pale imitation of Auden’s poetry of the period. Some contemporary observers, however, found that Berryman’s poetry of the early 1940s was of relevance to the current socio-political climate. Paul Strachan, for example, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1942, argued that “Berryman’s collection [*Poems* (1942)] is provocative, stirring up the right kind of protest and slinging a straight arrow at social and political corruption.”⁴² Leslie Fiedler, in a comparative review of *The Dispossessed*, Randall Jarrell’s *Losses*, and William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson* (Book II), suggested that Berryman “is the most conservative of the three poets [...] but for him, too, there is no way of utterly evading the perils of the current necessity to extend the poem’s range of feeling.”⁴³ Nevertheless, most critics tended to agree with Northrop Frye’s extreme view that Berryman’s early work was nothing more than “constipated elegance”.⁴⁴ Frye was clearly referring to the strained formality of some of Berryman’s earliest published poems when he described his work in these terms, poems such as “The Apparition,” “Meditation,” and “Night and the City,” for example, which were written during his time at Cambridge and when Yeats’s formal example had its strongest bearing on his work. It is a great error, however, to claim that all of Berryman’s work from the period up to and including the publication of *The Dispossessed* strains under Yeats’s formal example. More importantly, Berryman’s engagement with Yeats during this period and

later in his career was bound up with his understanding of personal and national selfhood at a time when he “felt estranged from America,” as Simpson has recounted.⁴⁵

Berryman’s sense of alienation from mainstream American authority is marked by the pervasiveness of the themes and tropes of “travel” and “homelessness” in *The Dispossessed*. In fact, when he was preparing the book’s contents page in 1947 he noted the recurrence of “travel” and “homelessness” in the collection as a whole.⁴⁶ In the same notes Berryman also asked “How many *show* Yeats?” Regarding the formal influence of Yeats, the later poems of *The Dispossessed* demonstrate Berryman’s movement away from a poetics grounded in a merely formalist conception of influence towards a poetry born out of his awareness of the intertextual nature of artistic production in the late 1940s. That process culminated with the publication of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (which was begun in 1947) in 1953. In many respects, however, the poems of the final section of *The Dispossessed* provide a bridge between Berryman’s early work and *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, signalling the poet’s clear relinquishment of his earlier models and forms and presenting a more complex level of critique than the sometimes occasional-sounding political poems of his earlier period.

Berryman’s early poetry’s engagement with contemporary social and political issues is undermined to some extent by the widely held belief that the reflections on the same period described in *Love & Fame* should be read in terms of uncomplicated autobiography. The most pressing matter for the figure Berryman called the “distasteful Braggart” (CP 290) of the early poems of *Love & Fame*—whose dramatic time directly precedes his return to New York in 1938—is not the German occupation of Poland or economic depression in the United States or elsewhere. Rather, these poems present a figure largely indifferent to the world of politics and economics, preoccupied instead by considerations of sexual conquest and future fame. Whatever information may be obtained about Berryman’s early career from the poems of *Love & Fame* must be

balanced against the fact that many of the poems Berryman wrote during this period—including those pieces he wrote in the two years following his return to the United States in 1938—express very little of the bravado and self-centred indulgence for which the “distasteful Braggart” of the later book is noted.

Berryman’s time at Cambridge University came before he met such figures as Bhain Campbell and Saul Bellow who both exerted considerable influence on the development of his early political and social consciousness. Berryman did not meet Bellow until 1948 but he came under Campbell’s influence in the late 1930s. A Marxist poet and scholar whom Berryman first met in New York in 1939 and who died at the age of 29 a year later, Campbell played a major role in the development of Berryman’s poetry as critique. Berryman subsequently dedicated his New Directions pamphlet *Poems* to Campbell and he wrote about Campbell’s early death on a number of occasions throughout his career. In the poem “Relations” in *Love & Fame*, for example, he writes that “Bhain Campbell was extracted from me / in dolour, yellow as a second sheet” (CP 201-2), and in Dream Song 88 Campbell is described as, “dear of Henry’s friends, / yellow with cancer, paper-thin, & bent / even in the hospital bed / racked with high hope, on whom death lay hands”.

Haffenden has suggested that the poems “Thanksgiving: Detroit” and “Communist” were both inspired, indeed provoked, by Campbell’s example. The former poem, Haffenden explains, “treats, as from Campbell’s point of view, the sociopolitical theme of a workers’ strike at the Highland Park Ford motor plant in Detroit.”⁴⁷ At this time both Berryman and Campbell were teaching at Wayne State University in Detroit so they were fully aware of the day-to-day developments of the strike. In “Thanksgiving: Detroit” Berryman describes the division that was established between the striking workers, “Men in the Square / Idle, [...] standing as they stood,” and the frivolously happy “Finks and goons in the streets of the city.” (CP 281-2) Berryman’s use of the

word “finks” is worth noting. As indicated by Ralph Ellison’s use of the same word in *Invisible Man* (1952), it was a highly charged and derogatory word at the time. Ellison’s novel is deeply concerned with the theme of dispossession in contemporary American life, and one of its most important scenes describes a crowd of disaffected factory-workers chanting: “WE’LL BE DISPOSSESSED NO MORE!”⁴⁸ Regarding the use of the word “fink,” the protagonist of Ellison’s novel is at one point subjected to a mock trial at the “Liberty” paint plant, set up to decide whether he is a “fink” or not: the “chairman” at the meeting, however, tells the assembled workers not to “ride that word too hard,” thus signifying something of its caustic connotations.⁴⁹

In “Thanksgiving: Detroit” Berryman is unrelenting in his condemnation of capital’s purchase of power, of the “cops / Clubbing and watching the clubbing of men,” (*CP* 282) and of the general mistreatment of the striking workers by their Ford employers. The notorious treatment of the workers at the Ford motor plant in Detroit was written about by Edmund Wilson as early as 1932, when he warned of the need to produce “statesmen, organizers or engineers with the ability and the will to prevent the periodical impoverishment of the people who work for Ford and the wrecking of their energies in his factories.”⁵⁰ Berryman’s poem reiterates Wilson’s concerns, and echoes the observations of John Dos Passos who presents the following scathing description of the industrialists in *The Big Money* (1936): “they have clubbed us off the streets they are stronger they are rich they hire and fire the politicians the newspapereditors the old judges the small men with reputations the collegepresidents the wardheelers [...] they hire the men with guns the uniforms the policecars the patrolwagons.”⁵¹ “Thanksgiving: Detroit” is written out of a desire for empathy with the striking workers and it voices Berryman’s opposition to the men and women enjoying Thanksgiving in the vicinity of the Ford plant, and in the bars along “Six Mile Road” while the striking workers starve:

Lockout. The seventh week. Men in the Square
Idle, but the men are standing as they stood.
Thanksgiving is tomorrow. Shall Labour
Rejoice? Or curse? Shall Labour split that turkey?

(CP 281)

Berryman's charge that Thanksgiving, the day when Americans celebrate the idea that theirs is a land of freedom and plenty, has become for these workers a time of violence and fear strikes at the heart of American democracy. "The conflagration and the guns move right / As the fuel and the ammunition blaze," he writes, indicating a shift in power towards the political right, to the aid of the capitalist employers rather than to the assistance of the disaffected workers. "Thanksgiving: Detroit," then, although it might be justifiably dismissed as a fairly banal piece in formal or stylistic terms, is an important poem in terms of the development of Berryman's critical awareness of American capitalist economy, under which the individual's rights are subsumed by the power of industry and wealth.

(ii)

"Thanksgiving: Detroit" was not included in *The Dispossessed* but a significant number of the poems in that collection express Berryman's disaffection towards mainstream American authority no less effectively. "Boston Common," as Mariani has written, was at this point in Berryman's career "the most formidable and complex lyric he'd yet undertaken."⁵² Begun in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941, Berryman's "meditation upon the hero" prefigures his meditations on the futility of patriotism in many later poems, including "Formal Elegy," written after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, and many individual Dream Songs. In "Boston Common," the pointlessness of patriotism is indicated by Berryman's bathetic opening description of the fallen men (in Augustus Saint-Gaudens' Shaw Memorial sculpture in Boston), "Slumped under the impressive genitals / Of the bronze charger, protected by bronze".

(CP 41) The figure of the fallen “hero,” a glorified casualty of war, lying in his “Clothing and organs,” is presented by Berryman not so much as an example of American patriotism and bravery, but as “a common character,” a tragic Everyman thrown by the warmongers of State into the “crucible night [where] all singularity, / Idiosyncrasy and creed, [are] burnt out.” (CP 42) “War is the / Congress of adolescents,” he writes, echoing Herman Melville’s claim that “All wars are boyish, and are fought by boys,” in his poem “The March Into Virginia.”⁵³ Berryman offers a universal condemnation of all warring parties, regardless of “singularity,” “Idiosyncrasy,” or “creed”.

“Boston Common” engages the reader in a critique of all wars and gestures of patriotic fortitude, in the same way that “Winter Landscape,” the opening poem of *The Dispossessed*, compels the reader to consider “the evil waste of history / Outstretched”. (CP 3) In an unsigned editorial condemning the American bombing of Hiroshima composed with Dwight Macdonald for the journal *Politics* in August 1945, Berryman repeats this decidedly anti-patriotic position on the futility of war. Berryman and Macdonald argue that “Atomic bombs are the natural product of the kind of society *we* have created. They are as easy, normal, and enforced an expression of the American Standard of Living as electric iceboxes.”⁵⁴ Their anger is directed not towards some foreign aggressor, in a gesture of patriotic fortitude; rather, it is directed at mainstream contemporary American social and political culture itself:

At 9:15 on the morning of August 6, 1945, an American plane dropped a single bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Exploding with the force of 20,000 tons of TNT, the bomb destroyed in a twinkling two-thirds of the city, including, presumably, most of the 343,000 human beings who lived there. No warning whatsoever was given. This atrocious action places “us,” the defenders of civilisation, on a moral level with “them,” the beasts of Maidanek. And “we,” the American people, are just as much and as little responsible for this horror as “they,” the German people.⁵⁵

Berryman and Macdonald question the general American castigation of the “they”—the Japanese, German, and Russian peoples—decriing as savage hypocrisy the praise

simultaneously lavished on such figures as General George S. Patton and Admiral William F. (“Bull”) Halsey at home.⁵⁶ Their general condemnation of war disdains the call to national self-assertion and signals instead a serious and potentially treasonous opposition to any greater American cause.

Berryman’s sense of estrangement from—and antagonism towards—mainstream American political and cultural life is expressed in the *Politics* editorial he composed with Macdonald in terms of the distance he felt between himself and the more general American public, by whose standards an illusory and self-elevating ethical gap is constructed between the wrongs committed by “them” (the Germans or Japanese or Russians) and “us.” Guilt, in Berryman’s view, is general: whether in Auschwitz or Hiroshima, he argues, the crime is the same. In notes in his copy of Søren Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness Unto Death* purchased in 1944,⁵⁷ he teased out his understanding of a pervasive and “general” sense of guilt when he compiled a detailed catalogue of his guilt-feelings, ranging from “sexual fatigue” and “poetic betrayal or destruction of talent,” to what he referred to as a more general set of personal and public “betrayals.” Berryman and Macdonald’s belief that Americans should shoulder some of the blame for the hatred and prejudice that fuelled the Second World War, normally associated with the German or Russian or Japanese “other,” was also a betrayal because it undermined the kind of national pride that mainstream culture normally expects, and usually demands, of its poets.

A further significant example of Berryman’s developing social critique and sense of identification with the “other” during this period is his 1945 short story, “The Imaginary Jew.” (FP 359-66) This short story, which won first prize in the *Kenyon Review*/Doubleday Doran short story competition in 1945 and was subsequently translated into German and published in *Die Neue Rundschau* in a version by the historian Erich Kahler in 1946, tells of a Southern Catholic who is attacked and “accused” of

being Jewish by a racist Irishman one evening in a New York City park. At first, the Southern man, who is the story's protagonist and narrator, strongly denies the claims of the Irishman: he is simply not Jewish. By the end of the story, however, at the end of his tether with the other fellow's lack of reason and blatant anti-Semitism, he awakens to a greater, more universally humanist understanding of identity:

In the days following, as my resentment died, I saw that I had not been a victim altogether unjustly. 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.

(*FP* 366)

Earlier in the story Berryman refers ironically to the "advanced heterogeneous democratic society" of the United States, and the "gently negative" attitude he suggests it holds towards Jews and other minorities (*FP* 360). Berryman uses the incident described in "The Imaginary Jew" to highlight very real occurrences of prejudice and racism in the United States. By referring to the tenuous connection between the "real" Jew and the "imaginary" Jew, in terms of his awareness of the relationship between perception and prejudice, Berryman not only signals a sense of identification with the Other, but he also initiates a critique of the historical impulse towards social and cultural homogeneity that is characterised by an attempt to erase or ignore the realities of racial and cultural difference in the United States.

"The Imaginary Jew" is an important early expression of what Hilene Flanzbaum has recognised as Berryman's "disaffection from mainstream culture" during this period.⁵⁸ This and other texts from this period of his career indicate Berryman's realisation that the historical effort to define the United States of America as an "advanced" democracy or social and cultural totality is based upon principles of exclusion and evasion. In these texts Berryman is acutely aware of what he terms the "discontinuity" of individual, national, and cultural identity. This was an issue that

Berryman deliberated with Kahler following the publication of Kahler's *Man the Measure: A New Approach to History* in 1943. In his study Kahler wrote that, "Unless there is a continuous whole, either of mankind or of human nature, there is no such thing as human history, just as there could be no individual biography without the continuous identity of personality."⁵⁹ Berryman disagreed, however, and in his notes on this passage in his copy of Kahler's book he wrote: "But I am more & more struck by the likelihood that even indiv[idual] identity is *not* continuous; as clearly it is discontinuously aware"⁶⁰. Berryman could not agree with Kahler that history and identity must always be read in terms of continuity, and least of all in the American context where the desire for national wholeness tends towards ideological isolationism and an assertion of the veracity of the American dream. Given his understanding of dispossession as something that, as he put it in 1962, "reaches deep into modern agony"⁶¹, Berryman could not accept that there was anything certain or continuous about identity in either personal, national, or historical terms.

(iii)

The Dispossessed begins with "Winter Landscape" (CP 3), which was written as "a reaction," as Berryman put it in 1965, "first, against Yeats's gorgeous and seductive rhetoric and, second, against the hysterical political atmosphere of the period." (FP 325) These remarks are significant, not least because they show that Berryman was attempting to write against Yeats's formal influence as early as 1938, during the period when he also described himself as "a burning, trivial disciple" of Yeats. (FP 323) In "Winter Landscape" Berryman clearly manages to write a poem that owes very little to Yeats's formal example. More important, however, is the fact that "Winter Landscape" describes the intense political atmosphere of the period *without* employing the "hysterical" tone of conventional political verse. In many respects a poem about survival, "Winter Landscape" is also about representation, and about what art can or

cannot represent of the harsh realities of the world. The poem begins with what appears to be a description of a scene from a painting by Bruegel (“The Hunters in the Snow”), “The three men coming down the winter hill / In brown, with tall poles and a pack of hounds / At heel”. (CP 3) The reader soon realises, however, that Berryman’s poem is also an act of interpretation, not so much of Bruegel’s painting or of the world that Bruegel attempted to represent in it, but more crucially of the world of “recurrent crises” that Berryman himself inhabited at the time. (FP 325)

William Carlos Williams, describing the men in the picture’s foreground unambiguously as hunters in “The Hunters in the Snow,”⁶² avoids some of the uncertainty—and therefore relinquishes some of the interpretative resonance—that Berryman’s poem promotes. “Winter Landscape” directs the reader away from Bruegel’s picture; it is therefore less committal, and more disturbing. While Berryman writes that the men are accompanied by “a pack of hounds,” his description of the “winter hill” in terms of “the evil waste of history / Outstretched,” suggests that the men are involved in activities that may pose a threat to their lives, the lives of their families, or others. Though they are equipped with nothing more than “tall poles,” there is a suggestion that the implements they carry have a dual function as both hunting tools and weapons. Berryman is not concerned here with providing a faithful reproduction in words of Bruegel’s painting, as Williams attempts in his poem (which is, after all, given the same title as the painting). Rather, Berryman uses the painting by Bruegel as a starting-point, from which he moves on to consider the more general issues it raises and their significance for his own time.

On one level, Berryman’s poem describes the historical persistence of social and creative effort, of “the red houses and the fire” and “the rink / Lively with children,” images of a community struggling to survive in spite of the persistent snow and the threat of war. In his essay “One Answer to a Question: Changes,” Berryman supports

reading “Winter Landscape” as “a war poem,” if of “an unusual negative kind.” (FP 325)

He writes that “the interpretation of *the event of the poem* proves that the picture has merely provided necessary material from a tranquil world for what is necessary to be said—but which the poet refuses to say—about a violent world.” (FP 325-6; Berryman’s emphasis)

“Winter Landscape” is an “unusual” and “negative” war poem precisely because it refuses to engage in the popular rhetoric of patriotic war poetry, based on positions of condemnation and appraisal. Berryman’s “refusal” is similar to other apparent evasions of ethical responsibility in poetry, such as Dylan Thomas’s “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London.” In that poem, Thomas writes of “London’s daughter” lying “Deep with the first dead [...] / Robed in the long friends,”⁶³ an image that is alluded to in Berryman’s description of “the long companions” in the eighth line of “Winter Landscape.” Thomas refuses to engage in the facile public mourning of the girl’s death, offering instead a solemn reminder of the universality and inevitability of death, what he calls “the last light breaking” that everyone must, sooner or later, confront. Similarly, what Berryman describes as his “refusal” to say “what is necessary [...] about a violent world” in “Winter Landscape” is bound up with a more profound sense of ethical responsibility, less concerned with describing particular occasions than with registering a more disturbingly widespread set of historical conditions.

Berryman’s poem does not refer to places or dates; it avoids any clear reference to the actual “hysterical political atmosphere of the period.” Nevertheless, in its manipulation of imagery and tone, “Winter Landscape” provides “the necessary material [...] for what is necessary to be said [...] about a violent world.” Paradoxically, it therefore embodies what may have been Bruegel’s original intention. In another painting, “Winter Landscape with Skaters and Birdtrap,” Bruegel utilised similar techniques to those employed in “The Hunters in the Snow” to create a picture that has been interpreted allegorically as a premonition of disaster.⁶⁴ David Wyatt has described

“Winter Landscape” as “a poem at the end of time,” because it “imitates in its structure the ultimate arrest it would envisage.”⁶⁵ That “arrest,” discerned by Wyatt in the formal movement and aesthetic pattern of the poem, also describes the suspension of time and belief that “Winter Landscape” attempts to convey. “Winter Landscape,” then, is a record of a culture on the brink. The sense of things on the brink, in terms of social and domestic, cultural and emotional precariousness and instability, is reflected in the unsettlingly calm preparedness with which Berryman enumerates the figures on the hill and in the village. With this poem in mind, Berryman described the way that “a poem’s force may be pivoted on a missing or misrepresented element in an agreed-on or imposed design” which may also be interpreted as an elaboration of his understanding of “refusal” in positive terms. (FP 326) There is a strong sense of imminent diminishment in the poem, of numbers dwindling (“three birds watch and the fourth flies”) and of a community diminishing before its time, as well as a sense that something is about to disappear or fade away. Indeed, this sense of departure and diminishment recurs throughout *The Dispossessed*, in Berryman’s frequent descriptions of descent and figures descending, at the end of “Winter Landscape” for example, and in “The Traveller” where the speaker descends into unknown territory at the end of the poem: “When the train stopped and they knew / The end of their journey, I descended too.” (CP 4)

Just as “Winter Landscape” concerns much more than Bruegel’s painting, “The Ball Poem” is not just about “the boy [...] who has lost his ball” (CP 11) or, as Toynebee suggests, “a sentimental popular song about the incurable sadness of a little boy losing his ball.”⁶⁶ The kind of “sadness” that Toynebee describes can be cured, however, whereas the more profound (cultural and social) malaise that Berryman’s poem attempts to record is not so easily remedied. “The Ball Poem” offers an insight into Berryman’s early social vision, and what in that poem he describes as the sense of “first responsibility / in a world of possessions.” (CP 11) Recognising the connection between social or

material reality and questions concerning existence and survival in general terms, Berryman argues that the “world of possessions”—the “external” world of money and materialism scorned in “Detroit: Thanksgiving”—is underscored by what he calls the “epistemology of loss.” The question of losing in “The Ball Poem” involves much more than the loss of a ball or, indeed, the price or mere monetary value of a ball: it further entails a consideration of the value of human life and the cost of human suffering. Searching for the submerged ball, “explor[ing] the deep and dark / Floor of the harbour,” the speaker in “The Ball Poem” is also searching for answers to questions concerning the meaning of human being, taking as a starting-point the universal ground of human suffering, “the bitter and exhausted ground / Out of which memory grows” that Berryman describes in “The Moon and the Night and the Men.” (CP 37)

Berryman’s understanding of the pervasiveness of loss and dispossession in universal existential, if not existentialist, terms is described in notes about the title-poem of *The Dispossessed* he made in 1962. In this important and unpublished manuscript item—quoted here in its entirety—Berryman writes that:

Most writers are influenced either for or against various parts of their work by the opinions admiring, hostile, or indifferent about them that turn up from outside, and it may be that my (moderate) liking for “The Dispossessed” is a product of the fact that only two readers, so far as I know, have ever paid any attention to it. Jacques Maritain who quoted it in one of his books and a critic (perhaps Mr. Nims—I forget and haven’t the issue at hand) who analysed it at some length in a *Poetry* supplement when it first appeared. I don’t suggest, of course, that it is worth attention; I am only exploring my own feeling. I think, though, that the liking is based rather on my sense at the time of succeeding in some degree with the job I set myself. This was 1947 or so. I was tired of writing noisy poems like “New Year’s Eve” and blowing poems like “Rock-Study with Wanderer”; I wanted something that would be both very neat, contained, and at the same time thoroughly mysterious.

I am not going to comment in detail on the poem, which is rather complicated. But it may be worth observing that I began with, or at any rate worked with, both the opposite directions the notion of dispossession points to: the miserable, *put out of one’s own*, and the relieved, saved, un-devilled, de-spelled. The first is the more important, and the second need not be agreeable—the devil cast out may be life.

Particularly because I used the poem as title-piece for a book, I have been sensitive since (as indeed I was long before) to the word ‘dispossessed’; and there

can be no harm in saying here that I have come on it not dozens but hundreds of times used in the specifically emphatic—central way I tried myself to achieve. The concept reaches deep into modern agony.⁶⁷

The scant critical engagement with “The Dispossessed” (and, indeed, the whole collection of that title) observed by Berryman in this piece is undergoing a slow reversal in recent analyses of his writing. Edward Brunner, for example, has examined Berryman’s engagement with the Cold War and the advent of the Atomic Age in “The Dispossessed” and other poems in his recent study *Cold War Poetry* (2001).⁶⁸ Berryman’s note reinforces the importance of reading “The Dispossessed,” in particular, in terms of its social and historical engagements.

“The Dispossessed” is also an interesting example of Berryman’s early formal experiments. Prefiguring the manipulations of syntax that would become more common in his later work, Berryman’s formal innovations combine here with an intertextual awareness that places him in the tradition of the *poeta doctus*, the learned poet who displays knowledge of literature and writing in his work. Beginning with a line from Luigi Pirandello’s play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* “The Dispossessed” is more than an experiment in intertextuality, however, and while it charts the process involved in *reading* Pirandello’s play, it can also be read as a complex meditation on Berryman’s understanding of the relationship between art and reality:

‘and something that . . . that is theirs—no longer ours’
stammered to me the Italian page. A wood
seeded & towered suddenly. I understood.—

The Leading Man’s especially, and the Juvenile Lead’s,
and the Leading Lady’s thigh that switches & warms,
and their grimaces, and their flying arms:

our arms, our story. . . .

(CP 66)

In the course of the poem the reader is brought through the closing scenes of Pirandello’s play, the “characters” wrestling with “the company” for the truth, each

group fighting for their own version of “reality” until they are forced to realise that there is no way of telling the difference between what is “real” and what is “make-believe.”⁶⁹ In Berryman’s poem this confusion is registered by a description of figures from the play merging into one another, “The Juvenile Lead’s the Leader’s arm, one arm / running the whole bole, branches, roots, (O watch) / and the faceless fellow waving from her crotch,” all characters cut through by the same disturbing life-force and described as “Stalin-unanimous!”, though in the end no single figure assumes victory over the other, “no hero rides.” (CP 67)

The difficult merging of opposing forces that takes place at the end of Pirandello’s play, represented by the Producer’s resignation that “reality” and “make-believe” can both “go to hell,”⁷⁰ is symptomatic of a description of modern literature in terms of its “desire, however frustrating and frustrated, to achieve reconciliation of opposites, [the] reconciliation of the world of reality with the world of the imagination.”⁷¹ That tenuous “reconciliation” of opposing forces in Pirandello’s play is described in the closing lines of Berryman’s poem by a confluence of clashing colours and ideas, dark “cold black trunks” against the purple-pink “peachblow glory of the perishing sun”: “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) Berryman’s “perishing sun” is reminiscent of the “dayes deep midnight” in John Donne’s “Nocturnal upon St. Lucy’s Day,”⁷² but it also alludes to the “cold and passionate [...] dawn” of Yeats’s poem “The Fisherman,”⁷³ which is concerned on one level with uniting the opposing forces of “make-believe” and “reality.” For Berryman, writing during a “decade of Survival,” the disjointed narrative of “The Dispossessed” registers his desperate attempt to make sense of a world where, as Brunner puts it, “the ‘perishing sun’ may evoke a nuclear fireball [...], and civilisation and tradition amount to no more than ‘empty houses where old things take place.’”⁷⁴ Brunner’s point, indeed, is

reinforced by Berryman's (unpublished) claim that Dante's *Inferno* presents "impressive resemblances between Hell and the Western Civilisation of 1945."⁷⁵

(iv)

Berryman ends "The Dispossessed"—and the book of that title—by expressing his awareness of the complex relationship between things imagined and real, between poetry and reality, at a time when the purpose of poetry was being questioned. By asserting art's ability to describe a bleak and confused reality in "The Dispossessed," Berryman ascribes value to poetry beyond the formal economy of aesthetics: like Thomas, Pirandello, and Yeats, he expresses his fundamental belief in the obdurate connection between art and reality, which is also a recognition of the social value of poetry and its capacity for embodying and initiating critique of the social and political (dis)order. On one level the image of "empty houses where old things take place" at the end of "The Dispossessed" alludes to the "empty house" described by the Father in the first act of Pirandello's play where he says that "After [the Mother] had gone away, my house seemed empty."⁷⁶ In "The Dispossessed," however, more than one house is referred to, and so Berryman's "empty houses" also signify the many forms or "houses" of social and historical displacement and dispossession that are bound up with the condition of homelessness endemic in the general experience of modernity. By engaging with Pirandello in "The Dispossessed," and in a more sustained way with the figure of Yeats and other European writers in the course of his career, Berryman entered into an expansive poetic dialogue about the nature of modernity that extended beyond the confines of the American cultural context, and that sought to examine and describe the limits of that context in the process. This description of Berryman's early poetry clearly challenges Frye's view that Berryman's early poetry was "constipated" or obstructed. On the contrary, the complexity of Berryman's early work can only be appreciated when the idea of form is expanded to include a consideration of what he termed the "cold riot of the western

mind” in “Rock-Study with Wanderer,” the attending “strange voice sometimes patiently / Near in the air” (CP 57-8) that signals this poetry’s intense engagement with the cultural, social, and political contexts of its composition.

3. “The penal colony’s prime scribe”: *Berryman’s Sonnets*

(i)

Berryman’s statement in 1948 that “ ‘the writer should’ do any damned thing he can think of to keep writing, writing well”⁷⁷ is a mark of his dedication to the place of poetry in a time of crisis. Although he could write to his mother in 1945 that news of the continuing war could “stop every thought like a fog of horror”⁷⁸ Berryman did continue to write, and with an increasing sense of the writer’s responsibility to register and record what was taking place around him. Berryman was not a political activist, nor did his poetry become the vehicle for some party-political agenda. Nevertheless, in pieces such as “Thanksgiving: Detroit,” “Boston Common,” and “The Imaginary Jew,” Berryman’s sense that “History is approaching a speechless end,” as he writes in “The Moon and the Night and the Men” (CP 36-7), is balanced at all times by a belief in the permanent value of poetry to “Show an affirming flame” as Auden wrote in “September 1, 1939.”⁷⁹ Or, as Berryman himself puts it in “Rock-Study with Wanderer”: “The music & the lights did not go out”. (CP 56)

The poems of *The Dispossessed* are frequently sidelined and sometimes dismissed in critical analyses of Berryman’s work as banal and uninteresting period- or apprentice-pieces. Nevertheless, these poems prepare the ground for the important critique of contemporary American culture of Berryman’s later work. In “The Moon and the Night and the Men,” for example, Berryman makes a simple point which, he goes on to stress, should not be described as “unimportant”; namely, that it is the same “violent moon” that rises for everyone, regardless of race, colour, nation, or creed. (CP 37) Of one

soldier's death Berryman writes: "He was a part of the night, part of the land, / Part of the bitter and exhausted ground / Out of which memory grows." (CP 37) The "land," the place of death, is unspecified, just as the soldier is unnamed. Neither does Berryman say whether the dead soldier was American, English, Belgian, or French. The absence of detail is significant, however, because it enables Berryman to reiterate the point he makes in "Boston Common" regarding the universal futility and waste of war. Moreover, "the bitter and exhausted ground / Out of which memory grows" in "The Moon and the Night and the Men" is also the common ground of guilt described by T. S. Eliot in 1939 when he said that everyone was "deeply implicated and responsible" for the collapse of the Munich Pact.⁸⁰ The moon shining upon the "bitter and exhausted ground" of history rises, as Berryman puts it, "in the breast of man": "we know the fate / Of none, nor of anyone, and the war / Goes on, and the moon in the breast of man is cold." (CP 37)

The value of poems such as "The Moon and the Night and the Men" resides in their unequivocal condemnation of war, and in their refusal to engage in patriotic idealism—which may have added to the generally negative critical attitude to Berryman's work in the 1940s. Repeatedly the poems of *The Dispossessed* present Berryman as a kind of outsider and as a critic of the greater social and political order. Berryman wrote a number of overtly political poems during this period of his career but a significant number of his early poems—such as "The Statue," "A Point of Age," and "On the London Train"—describe an alienated presence similar to "The Traveller" in the poem of that title, who "will never become as we are, try as he can." (CP 10-11) Coincidentally, "The Traveller" is also the most common translation of the term Franz Kafka used to describe the protagonist of his story "In the Penal Colony" (*In der Strafkolonie*),⁸¹ which is significant not least because Berryman refers to this particular story in Sonnet 73 (CP 107). Indeed, Berryman's description of the "unusual" and "negative" inconclusiveness of his political and war poems in "One Answer to a

Question: Changes” (FP 325)—which is often misrepresented as an attitude of disengagement or avoidance—may be read in the same terms proposed by Roy Pascal for interpreting Kafka’s social and political allegories. Writing about “In the Penal Colony” in particular, Pascal argues that, “If the ending is morally inconclusive, if it does not round off the story and resolve the problems it has set, it shows us something equally important, since its inconclusiveness tells us that these are problems that are not settled but still have to be wrestled with.”⁸² *The Dispossessed* begins, and ends, on a similar note. Written in 1947—with the exception of Sonnets 107 and 112-117 which were added before the sequence was published in 1966—it is rarely remarked that *Berryman’s Sonnets* also records Berryman’s attempts to write the “decade of Survival.”

The phrase “Uncanny judgements” in Sonnet 73 summarises the increasingly experimental nature of Berryman’s poetry as the 1940s progressed. This is especially evident in the poems of the fourth and fifth sections of *The Dispossessed*, where clear innovations of syntax and form may be discerned. The seven “Nervous Songs” (CP 49-55) are particularly impressive because in these poems Berryman begins an exploration of the possibilities of persona and voice that was perfected later in *The Dream Songs*. The phrase “Uncanny judgements” in Sonnet 73, however, also indicates Berryman’s awareness of himself as an outsider, a dispossessed critic of the new world order pitching his judgements “against the tribe” from the fringes of culture. (CP 107) In continental philosophy and postcolonial discourse, the term “uncanny” has been used to describe both the strangeness of modern experience and the homelessness that has been suggested as the prevailing condition of modernity.⁸³ The semantic doubleness of the term is exemplified by the German compound “*unheimlichkeit*,” which may be translated as both “uncanniness” and “homelessness” (although the term “*Heimatlosigkeit*” is more commonly used to denote the latter).

Berryman's description of himself as "the penal colony's prime scribe" in Sonnet 73 draws on Kafka's portrayal of the "traveller" or "explorer" in "In the Penal Colony." Moreover, the direct reference to Kafka's parable suggests an important allegorical imperative in what is usually interpreted as a sequence of erotic or love sonnets. In Sonnet 73 and other sonnets in the sequence the ostensible "private" world is supplanted by an urgent sense of engagement with "public" social and political concerns. This comes as no surprise given Berryman's work as a Shakespeare scholar and his awareness of what E. M. W. Tillyard—who was one of Berryman's instructors at Cambridge University—described as the relationship between "microcosm" and "the body politic" (or "macrocosm") in Renaissance literature, in his study *The Elizabethan World Picture*, first published in 1943.⁸⁴ In *Berryman's Sonnets* the private turmoil caused by the affair with "Lise" or "Chris" may be read as the "microcosmic" element in an allegorical framework that has its corresponding element in the "body politic," as it were, in terms of what David K. Weiser has called Berryman's writing of "the conflict between the individual and society."⁸⁵ Weiser reads that "conflict" in terms of society's moral chastisement of the adulterous couple, and he describes the clash of traditional values in the sonnet sequence between the centrality of marriage and the corruption caused by adultery and sexual indiscretion. If Berryman's sonnets draw attention to this clash of values, however, they also convey a strong sense of Berryman's unease with contemporary American society, which involved much more than his feelings about infidelity and inappropriate desire. Indeed, the persistent longing to be elsewhere in the sonnets must be read as part of a greater malaise, and a further example of the disaffection and dispossession that was central to Berryman's understanding of poetry's function at this stage in his career.

In "The Nervous Songs" Berryman describes a group of people who represent in collective terms a cross-section of society's dispossessed and disaffected—a vain and

“irresponsible” young woman who asks “Where am I going?” (CP 49), a “Demented” priest, a young Hawaiian who realises that “ ‘We are a dying race’ ” (CP 50), a professor who is tired of his job, a lovelorn captain, a “Tortured” girl, and an uncertain bridegroom. The State, comprising infirm and unstable citizens, is described in *Berryman’s Sonnets* by the recurring figure of the ship or “ship of state,” which can be traced back to Plato’s *Republic* through an anonymous fifteenth century poem of that title.⁸⁶ In Sonnet 109, for example, the speaker (not necessarily the poet) is presented “in his yacht [...] / Up and down the whole coast six months . . last / It couldn’t: . . the pair to Paris. Chaos, result.” (CP 125) Again in Sonnet 25, hopelessness is described in maritime terms:

. . . the mate has wired
Hopeless: Locked in, and humming, the Captain’s nailing
 A false log to the lurching table. Lies
 And passion sing in the cabin on the voyage home,
 The burgee should fly Jolly Roger: wind
 Madness like the tackle of a crane (outcries
 Ascend) around to heave him from the foam
 Irresponsible, since all the stars rain blind

(CP 83)

These figurations of despair have an obvious source in the tumultuous last days of an affair but they also describe Berryman’s general feeling of displacement and uncertainty at this period of his life, which was bound up with his lack of faith in contemporary American authority to steer the “ship of state” safely “home.”

(ii)

This kind of double reading is common in studies of Renaissance poetry and in Sonnet 15 (“What was Ashore, then? . . Cargoed with Forget”), Berryman offers a version of Petrarch’s “*Passa la nave mia colma d’oblio*,”⁸⁷ which was translated into English in the sixteenth century as “My Galy Charged with Forgetfulness” by Sir Thomas Wyatt.⁸⁸ In Wyatt’s version Petrarch’s poem is recast as an examination of the dangerous

connections between sexual intrigue and political advancement in the court of Henry VIII:

My galy charged with forgetfulnes
Thorough sharp sees in wynter nyghtes doeth pass
Twene Rock and Rock, and eke myn ennemy, Alas,
That is my lorde, sterith with cruelnes;⁸⁹

In Berryman's sonnet, the original Petrarchan concentration on the theme of thwarted love appears at first to be Berryman's principal theme also: "My ship runs down a midnight winter storm / Between whirlpool and rock, and my white love's form / Gleams at the wheel, her hair streams." (CP 78) The sense of imminent shipwreck ("And I begin now to despair of port") that pervades *Berryman's Sonnets* relates not only to the impending end of a difficult affair, however, but also to the speaker's return to the reality of life in an uncertain Cold War world, "Where the dangerous land meets the disordered sea . . ." (CP 110)

In the penultimate sonnet of the sequence (Sonnet 116) Berryman writes that: "The cause of our story / which led us up from Hell to Purgatory, / then again downwards, has been fully penned / and stands mysterious". (CP 128) The whole sequence, then, and its "cause" is left open to interpretation. To suggest that his affair with "Lise" or "Chris" was the sole "cause" of Berryman's crisis is to underestimate the broader social difficulties that he confronted during this decade. In Sonnet 73, when Berryman writes himself into a version of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," he begins by *demanding* the reader to consider again the meaning of his Sonnets' "riddled end": to forego, in other words, the apparent "cause" of his emotional and intellectual anguish and to consider other, less traditionally "obvious" reasons for his despair. Taking the "traditional" (indeed, Petrarchan) view of the sonnet sequence *Berryman's Sonnets* may be read only as the extended confession of a love affair. In Sonnet 103, however, as Weiser argues, Berryman admonishes the surfeit of romance in the Petrarchan sonnet, while

simultaneously checking his own indulgence in amatory excess. In this sonnet Berryman expresses his sense of the foolishness of his actions and, more crucially, he prepares the ground for the presentation of the beloved and, indeed, the entire affair, as a “text” in Sonnet 114, where he writes: “I’m sweating it out like asterisks: so there,— / you are the text”. (CP 127)

In Sonnet 103 Berryman questions the sincerity of his earlier feelings, and asks:

A ‘broken heart’ . . . but *can* a heart break, now?
Lovers have stood bareheaded in love’s ‘storm’
Three thousand years, changed by their mistress’ ‘charm’,
Fitted their ‘torment’ to a passive bow,
Suffered the ‘darts’ under a knitted brow,
And has one heart *broken* for all this ‘harm’?

(CP 122)

Undermining the authenticity of the amatory aspect of these lines, in Sonnet 73 Berryman develops the point and insists that the reader consider the “text” of his affair in allegorical terms, drawing on the example of the author for whom Walter Benjamin claimed, “he [...] possessed in the highest degree what Malebranche called ‘the natural prayer of the soul’: attentiveness.”⁹⁰ Kafka’s “attentiveness,” as Benjamin read it, was assimilated by Berryman as “readiness” in his contribution to the 1948 symposium on “The State of American Writing” in *The Partisan Review*.⁹¹ Kafka’s “attentiveness” to the general social and political poverty of his time is nowhere more acute than in “In the Penal Colony” and that story has been described as one of the Czech writer’s most significant political allegories, even though “it contains no suggestion of national conflict, nor is there any implication that human rights and humanitarianism or authoritarianism and militarism are to be identified with one nation or another.”⁹² In a similar way, Berryman’s poetry from the 1940s refuses to engage in party politics and offers instead a general overview of a culture that allows its citizens to be alienated and silenced for mainly ideological reasons. In Sonnet 73 Berryman uses the allusion to Kafka’s story to

explain the paradoxical nature of his own experience of social and political alienation and antagonism: as a part-time university teacher he holds a position of power, but at the same time he must yield to greater powers within the academy and beyond. So, in his manipulation of Kafka's allegory of power Berryman is both master of the rack *and* tortured officer, "flat on my own machine / Priest of the one Law no despair can bribe". (CP 107) Berryman uses Kafka's parable in Sonnet 73, then, to draw attention to the relationship between the "private" and the "public" realms, the personal and the political. His description of himself as "the penal colony's prime scribe" may be read in terms of his chronicling of a sexual ("penal" suggesting "penile") affair in the sonnets; but it may also be interpreted as a recognition of his role as a writer (or "scribe") who critically observes the nation state ("the penal colony") in his work.



That Berryman should have viewed the United States in the 1940s as a "penal colony" is further evidence of his alienation from, and antagonism towards, the place where "Disfigurement is general" as he put it in the earlier poem "The Statue." (CP 14) The sense of "disfigurement" that Berryman discerned in contemporary American society and culture is reflected in the range of texts discussed in this chapter, from the racist ugliness described in "The Imaginary Jew" to the deformity of the "faceless fellow waving from her crotch" in "The Dispossessed" (CP 67), the Kafkaesque transformations of the self in *Berryman's Sonnets*, and the epiphanies of disaffection and distress described in "The Nervous Songs." In an essay on the poetry of Ezra Pound first published in 1949 Berryman wrote that "To find out what a modern poet has done, we have often to ask *why* he did it." (FP 268; Berryman's emphasis) Berryman's fervent engagement with Yeats at the start of his career signifies his disengagement from mainstream American cultural authority, which is a recurring theme in what is generally regarded as the poetry of the first phase of his career, up to and including the first publication of *Homage to*

Mistress Bradstreet in the *Partisan Review* in 1953. Given the fact that Berryman started writing the poem that would become *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in 1948,⁹³ however, it is not surprising that echoes of some of the later poems of *The Dispossessed* in particular may be heard in the longer poem. The opening lines of “The Long Home,” for example—“The Long Home // bulks where the barley blew, time out of mind / Of the sleepless Master” (CP 59)—may be discerned in the strange imagery of the opening lines of the third stanza of *Bradstreet*: “thy eyes look to me mild. Out of maize & air / your body’s made, and moves. I summon, see, / from the centuries it.” (CP 133)

Homage to Mistress Bradstreet represents Berryman’s first major articulation of the inadequacy of the isolationist version of American identity. Berryman prepares the ground for the ideological interventions of *Bradstreet* in many of his earlier poems, however, and in “The Long Home” the impossibility of locating a single or central origin of culture is described in a manner that pre-empts the critique of the exceptionalist understanding of the Puritan origins of the American self in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*:

Wicked vistas! The wolves mourn for our crime
Out past the grey wall. On to our home,
Whereby the barley may seed and resume.
Mutter of thrust stones palls this room,
The crash of mallets. He is going where I come,
Barefoot soul fringed with rime.

(CP 61)

The quest for “home” described in “The Long Home” is terminal: some sense of “home” exists for the speaker, but it is clear that s/he will remain homeless indefinitely. The uncertainty of ever reaching “home” is signalled by the word “may”: “On to our home / Whereby the barley *may* seed and resume.” Rather than celebrate the security of settlement, “The Long Home” may be read as a narrative of displacement and dispossession. On one level the poem describes the rise and fall of a family, “whirled down without heir” in Faulknerian fashion. (CP 61) The corruption associated with this

fall is related to Berryman's sense of the failure of the American dream, and it is described in terms of an eviction and the destruction of the family home: "—One look round last, like rats, before we leave. / A famous house." (CP 61) Berryman's poem ends with a description of an impoverished or "barefoot" figure, "fringed with rime" or frost-bitten—cast out into the same kind of "Winter Landscape" of dispossession and uncertainty that opens *The Dispossessed*.

The destruction of the "famous house" in "The Long Home" is bound up with Berryman's more general dismantling of the American dream in *The Dispossessed* and in his other published and unpublished writings from the 1940s. The "Barefoot soul fringed with rime" at the end of "The Long Home" may be read as a figure on the margins of society and culture. The phrase can also be interpreted as a description of Berryman's understanding of his own position outside the mainstream, "firing against the tribe / Uncanny judgments ancient and unclean" as he puts it in Sonnet 73. (CP 107) Berryman's use of the word "rime" in the last line of "The Long Home" includes more than a reference to either "frost" or "poetry" and, given his frequent use of puns and obsolete words, it may indeed refer to the act of making vacant, clearing out, or moving house.⁹⁴ This reading corresponds with the "eviction" described in "The Long Home," but it is also relevant to this study's general reappraisal of Berryman as a poet for whom the experience of modern American society and culture was underpinned by a sense of displacement and homelessness, what Yeats described as the phenomenon of being "Away."

In the decade from 1938 to 1948 Berryman accomplished much more than the abandonment of the overwhelming Yeatsian aesthetic that marked his earliest efforts during the period, and in an important sense he made discoveries during this decade without which his later work would be significantly less powerful. *The Dispossessed* contains many weak poems: for a first collection it was perhaps too long and Berryman

may well have regretted not editing it more carefully in later life.⁹⁵ Thomas Travisano's remark that "*The Dispossessed* is a tricky book for a friendly reader to respond to critically"⁹⁶ is often encountered in Berryman studies, and the fact that Berryman chose to include a mere thirteen poems from the original collection of fifty when he prepared his *Selected Poems 1936-1968* shortly before his death in 1972 is in itself significant. Nevertheless, an awareness of Berryman's intense engagement with American authority during the period he termed "the decade of survival" is necessary if the ideological interventions of his later work are to be appreciated.

Notes

¹ John Berryman, [On Dispossession], Unpublished Prose, Box 1, JBP. This single-page of manuscript notes on "The Dispossessed" and the theme of dispossession in general is dated 1 February 1962.

² Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993) 132.

³ This remark by Helen Stewart, an editor at William Sloane Associates, who published *The Dispossessed* in April 1948, is recorded in Berryman's manuscript notes for an unused preface to the collection, now held in the John Berryman Papers (JBP) at the University of Minnesota, Published Poetry, Box 2.

⁴ Anonymous review of *The Dispossessed*, *Times Literary Supplement* 3 July 1948: 374.

⁵ Berryman, "The State of American Writing, 1948: Seven Questions," *Partisan Review* 8 (August 1948): 855-94; 856. Subsequent references to this item are abbreviated PR.

⁶ Berryman, 1 July 1937, *We Dream of Honour: John Berryman's Letters to His Mother*, ed. Richard J. Kelly (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988) 104-6; 106. Berryman's emphasis.

⁷ John Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* (1982; London: Ark Paperbacks, 1983) 94-5.

⁸ E. M. Halliday, *John Berryman and the Thirties: A Memoir* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) 159.

⁹ Halliday 160.

¹⁰ Halliday 161.

¹¹ Marjorie Perloff, "Poètes Maudits of the Genteel Tradition: Lowell and Berryman," *Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry*, eds. Steven Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 99-116; 100. Perloff uses Eileen Simpson's phrase "game of poetical

chairs” to describe what she perceives as Berryman and his peers’ happily itinerant academic lifestyle. In *Poets In Their Youth: A Memoir* Simpson uses the term “game of poetical chairs” to describe the fact that Berryman, Lowell, and others of their generation had no choice but to move from one university to another in search of work during the 1940s and into the 1950s. Perloff conveniently excludes Simpson’s reminder that “the game of poetical chairs [...] depend[ed] on the whim of the whistle-blower”. See Eileen Simpson, *Poets In Their Youth: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1982) 203.

¹² Berryman, 10 June 1939, in Kelly, *We Dream of Honour* 136-7.

¹³ Berryman, 28 April 1940, in Kelly, *We Dream of Honour* 149-50.

¹⁴ Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (1982; London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 6.

¹⁵ Berryman, “The American Intellectual and the American Dream,” Unpublished Non-fiction Prose, Box 1, File 2, JBP. See Appendix 1.

¹⁶ Robert Giroux, “Henry’s Understanding,” *Yale Review* (April 1996): 96-103.

¹⁷ Giroux 103.

¹⁸ Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 48.

¹⁹ Lentricchia 48.

²⁰ Simpson 55.

²¹ PR 856.

²² PR 856-7.

²³ Theodor Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O’Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 196-210; 210.

²⁴ Adorno, “Lyric Poetry and Society,” 211-29; 211.

²⁵ Adorno 212.

²⁶ PR 857.

²⁷ PR 857. Berryman’s emphasis.

²⁸ This claim has been acknowledged by many scholars. See, for example, Frances K. Pohl who has noted that after the Second World War, “With political and economic supremacy assured, certain American critics began claiming cultural supremacy as well” in *Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947-1954* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989) 4.

²⁹ PR 857.

³⁰ PR 860.

³¹ W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (1979; London: Faber and Faber, 1982) 86-9; 80-3.

³² Auden 82.

³³ Auden 82.

³⁴ Auden 83.

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- ³⁵ Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: The Bodley Head, 1976) 353.
- ³⁶ Auden 82.
- ³⁷ Hynes 353. Hynes's emphasis.
- ³⁸ Hynes 353.
- ³⁹ Philip Toynbee, "Berryman's Songs," *Encounter* 24 (March 1965): 76-78. Reprinted in *Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman*, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988) 133-38; 135-36.
- ⁴⁰ Adorno 214.
- ⁴¹ Conrad Aiken, "Poetry: What Direction?" *New Republic* 104 (1941): 670-71.
- ⁴² Pearl Strachan, "The World of Poetry," *Christian Science Monitor* 3 Oct. 1942: 10. Cited in Joel Conarroe, *John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977) 8.
- ⁴³ Leslie Fiedler, "Some Uses and Failures of Feeling," *Partisan Review* 8 (August, 1948): 924-31; 927.
- ⁴⁴ Northrop Frye, "Books of the Month: Poetry," *Canadian Forum* 22 (October 1942): 200. Cited in Conarroe 8.
- ⁴⁵ Simpson 56.
- ⁴⁶ Berryman, [Contents Page for *The Dispossessed*], Published Poetry (*The Dispossessed*), Box 2, JBP.
- ⁴⁷ Haffenden 126.
- ⁴⁸ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965) 280.
- ⁴⁹ Ellison 179.
- ⁵⁰ Edmund Wilson, "Detroit Motors," *The Edmund Wilson Reader*, ed. Lewis M. Dabney (1983; New York: Da Capo Press, 1997) 203-20; 219.
- ⁵¹ John Dos Passos, *The Big Money* (1936) in *U.S.A.* (1938; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966) 1105.
- ⁵² Paul Mariani, *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman* 2nd ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996) 133.
- ⁵³ Herman Melville, "The March Into Virginia," *Collected Poems of Herman Melville*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Hendricks House, Chicago: Packard and Company, 1947) 10-11.
- ⁵⁴ Mariani 133. Emphasis added.
- ⁵⁵ *Politics* 2.8 (August 1945): 226. Berryman's notes for this editorial are quoted in Haffenden 158.
- ⁵⁶ This issue of *Politics* also contains a piece that heavily criticises the post-WW II hero-worship of the American General George S. Patton, Jr., and the military chief described as "the Patton of the Pacific," Admiral William F. ("Bull") Halsey. The article on Patton describes him as the one "of

the pearl-handled revolvers, the blood and guts, the wounded-soldier-slapping, and the foul mouth.” See *Politics* 2.8 (August 1945): 228.

⁵⁷ These notes are contained in the back of Berryman’s copy of Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness Unto Death*. Berryman’s library is held in the Wilson Library at the University of Minnesota. See Richard J. Kelly, *John Berryman’s Personal Library: A Catalogue* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999) 202.

⁵⁸ Hilene Flanzbaum, “The Imaginary Jew and the American Poet,” *English Literary History* 65 (Spring 1998): 259-75; 271.

⁵⁹ Erich Kahler, *Man the Measure: A New Approach to History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1943) 4.

⁶⁰ Berryman, end-paper note in a copy of Erich Kahler’s *Man the Measure* in John Berryman’s Personal Library, Special Collections, University of Minnesota.

⁶¹ Berryman, [On Dispossession].

⁶² William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, 1939-1962*, ed. Christopher MacGowan, vol. 2 (1988; London: Paladin, 1991) 386-87.

⁶³ Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, eds. Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: J. M. Dent, 1993) 85-6.

⁶⁴ “The hidden, menacing presence of the birdtrap has given rise to allegorical interpretations: obscure threats may lie in wait even for the young, heedless skaters, for example.” Tiziana Frati, *Bruegel: The Complete Paintings* (London: Granada Publishing, 1980) 8.

⁶⁵ David Wyatt, “Completing the Picture: Williams, Berryman, and ‘Spatial Form,’” *Colby Literary Quarterly* 13 (1977): 246-62; 257.

⁶⁶ Toynbee 136.

⁶⁷ Berryman, [On Dispossession].

⁶⁸ Edward Brunner, *Cold War Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001) 219.

⁶⁹ Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, in *Three Plays*, trans. Robert Rietty and Noel Creegan et al (London: Methuen, 1985) 65-134.

⁷⁰ Pirandello 133.

⁷¹ John Hayward, introduction, *John Donne: A Selection of His Poetry*, ed. John Hayward (1950; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985) 7.

⁷² Donne 50-1.

⁷³ W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, 2nd ed. (1991; London: Macmillan, 1993) 148-49.

⁷⁴ Brunner 219.

⁷⁵ Berryman, “On the ‘Purgatorio’ of Dante,” Unpublished Non-fiction Prose, Box 2, Folder 76, JBP. Berryman makes this claim in the opening paragraph of the unpublished essay.

⁷⁶ Pirandello 88.

⁷⁷ PR 857.

⁷⁸ Berryman, 1 February 1945, in Kelly, *We Dream of Honour* 216.

⁷⁹ Auden 89.

⁸⁰ T. S. Eliot, cited in David Aaron and Robert Bendiner, *The Strenuous Decade: A Social and Intellectual Record of the Nineteen-Thirties* (New York: Doubleday, 1970) xi. Berryman owned a copy of this book. See Kelly, *John Berryman's Personal Library* 3.

⁸¹ Franz Kafka, "In the Penal Colony," *Stories 1904-1924*, trans. J. A. Underwood (1981; London and Sydney: Cardinal Books, 1988) 147-78.

⁸² Roy Pascal, *Kafka's Narrators: A Study of His Stories and Sketches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 89.

⁸³ "Unheimlich, strictly 'not belonging to the home', does not mean 'unconcealed', but 'eerie, sinister, uncanny.' Thus 'in Angst one feels "unheimlich" ', it gives one the creeps. But 'Unheimlichkeit' here also means not-being-at-home." Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999) 97-8. See also Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial relocations in twentieth-century fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 19-34.

⁸⁴ E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943; Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1970) 114-20.

⁸⁵ David K. Weiser, "Berryman's Sonnets: In and Out of the Tradition," reprinted in *John Berryman: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1989) 133-47; 147.

⁸⁶ See Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964) 77-82.

⁸⁷ Petrarch, *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, trans. Robert M. Durling (1976; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) 335.

⁸⁸ Sir Thomas Wyatt, *Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, ed. Kenneth Muir (1949; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967) 22-3.

⁸⁹ Wyatt 22.

⁹⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (1973; London: Fontana, 1992) 108-35; 130.

⁹¹ PR 857.

⁹² Pascal 89.

⁹³ For a thorough discussion of the composition history of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* see John Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1980) 9-33.

⁹⁴ See *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 1594: "rime, *v.*⁴ Now *dial.* or *techn.* [...] **1.** *trans.* **a.** To make clear or vacant for one; to vacate, give up. *Obs.* [...] **b.** To clear or open up (a way) for one. *Obs.* [...] **c.** To clear for oneself, to take. *Obs.*" Berryman's "proneness to the eccentric and individual use of words, 'dictionary words'," is remarked by Joseph Warren Beach in "Secret Terror in the Heart," *Obsessive Images*, ed. William

Van O'Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960) 83-8; reprinted in Thomas, *Berryman's Understanding* 91-96; 95.

⁹⁵ Berryman made several changes to the poems of *The Dispossessed* in a copy of the book now held in Berryman's Personal Library at the University of Minnesota. While most of these changes are minor, some affect the quality of individual lines, such as the replacement of the period at the end of the penultimate line in "The Long Home" with a comma. In other instances Berryman changes actual words. One example of this is his replacement of "fierce" in the seventh line of "Young Woman's Song" (CP 49) with "free," which marks a significant change in the meaning of the line, if not the entire poem. These changes are not included in Charles Thornbury's edition of Berryman's *Collected Poems* but they might be noted as (manuscript or unpublished) variants in a future edition of his work.

⁹⁶ Thomas Travisano, *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1999) 290.

CHAPTER 3

NIGHTMARES OF EDEN: INTERROGATIONS OF THE AMERICAN SELF

IN *HOMAGE TO MISTRESS BRADSTREET*, 1949-59

'Tis of my country I would endite...

(Ezra Pound)¹

“My harpsichord weird as a koto drums / *adagio* for twilight,” Berryman writes in the closing poem of *The Dispossessed*. (CP 66) The image describes both the stylistic or formal departures heralded by the book’s later poems and, more subtly, Berryman’s sense of a contemporary American cultural *Götterdämmerung*, symbolised by what in “The American Intellectual and the American Dream” he terms a pervasive “American *pleonexia*.”² The disillusionment Berryman expressed in 1948 when he described “the sluggish influence of what is called the ‘cold war’ ”³ was, by the middle of the next decade, being recognised as a continuing condition of American culture. In a letter to Robert Giroux in May 1955 he wrote, “I hope you are personally weathering satisfactorily this humiliating & profoundly gloomy period for the United States.”⁴ Berryman’s description of “this humiliating & profoundly gloomy period” in American history, however, was less informed by a sense of patriotism or national pride than it was by his general feeling that, as he wrote in a letter to Allen Tate in 1959, “It is a disgusting age, the hell with it.”⁵ For Berryman, the continuing Cold War brought out the worst in American culture, and in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (“the colonial poem”⁶) his feelings about the American Dream and the state of the nation were translated into “nightmares of Eden” (CP 141): this chapter explores some aspects of that translation.

1. "The Colonial Poem"

(i)

The Dispossessed was published in May 1948. In early April of the same year Berryman wrote to his mother: "After eighteen months' thought, I came this morning suddenly on the *subject* for the long poem I've been drafting, and am elated; though it will be Fall at least before I can hope to get at it steadily."⁷ The long poem was *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, about which John Haffenden has claimed Berryman "was very fond of declaring it took him exactly five years to write."⁸ Berryman's remark in the letter to his mother, however, suggests that the poem was on his mind for at least eighteen months longer than that, and indeed Haffenden takes this point on board by considering the importance of Berryman's affair in 1947 to the writing of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. Nevertheless, some points regarding the poem's composition, and indeed Berryman's intentions, seem to be in contention. Why did Berryman need to spend eighteen months thinking about "the *subject*" for a long poem if it had already been written about in a long sonnet sequence? *Berryman's Sonnets* ends with an epilogue taken from the story of Samson and Delilah in the Book of Judges which reads: "Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again, as when he was shaven." (Judges, xvi.22) The epilogue—which appears in the first typescript of the sequence, completed in 1947—suggests that Berryman felt he had recovered, emotionally and intellectually, after what was by all accounts a tumultuous affair, *before* he embarked on his next long project, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*.

As Sharon Bryan has argued, it is not necessary to read *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* as "a direct outgrowth of the *Sonnets*,"⁹ nor is it incontrovertibly the case that *Bradstreet* is an extension of Berryman's meditation on the themes of seduction and desire in the earlier sequence. Indeed, the general unwillingness to consider *Berryman's Sonnets* as anything more than a record of the poet's first extra-marital affair has been paralleled in

critical evaluations of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. One of the earliest commentators on the poem, John Frederick Nims, suggested that it was “really about” Berryman’s “need for a mistress, confidante, confessor.”¹⁰ Nims wrote that, “One might think there would be more satisfactory candidates for this triple role among the living.”¹¹ Haffenden’s thorough and persuasive account of the poem concludes with a similar reflection on Berryman’s need for what he calls “a figure uniting mistress and wife.”¹² He reads the long poem as “a lament for a doomed marriage”,¹³ citing Berryman’s break-up with his first wife Eileen Simpson in evidence. Simpson left Berryman, however, after the couple’s return to the United States following a trip to Europe in August 1953, by which time Berryman had long completed the manuscript for the poem and deposited it in a vault at the First National Bank in Princeton.¹⁴ Berryman’s feverish immersion in the writing of the poem, in the later stages especially, may well have contributed to the failure of his marriage to Simpson, but the poem itself involves much more than the break-up of Berryman’s first marriage.

In his study of Stephen Crane, first published in 1950, Berryman asked: “Who knows how many origins a deep work has?”¹⁵ Berryman’s study of Crane concludes with an admittedly naïve psychoanalytical reading which suggests that “Rivalry against the father, and the wish to *be* the father” is the fundamental impulse in Crane’s writing.¹⁶ In the course of his study, however, Berryman expands his consideration of the origins of Crane’s work from literary to non-literary sources in a manner that is similar to the richly contextualist treatment of Shakespeare’s writing presented in the essay “Shakespeare at Thirty,” first published in *The Hudson Review* in 1953. (FP 29-55) “Football was more instructive, probably, than Zola”,¹⁷ Berryman writes in his analysis of Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, referring to an earlier critic’s amazement at Crane’s ability to describe war when he had never experienced it firsthand. Berryman uses this incident to emphasise the novelist’s ability to record human experience with what he calls “an ear

like a trap.”¹⁸ Berryman believed that Crane’s environment was crucial to the development of his art, and this point is further acknowledged in his descriptions of Crane’s childhood in New York and his travels in the West and in Europe.

The importance that Berryman ascribes to the social or environmental dimension of Crane’s writing is eclipsed by the attention that has been paid to the book’s final chapter, and the psychoanalytical “primal scene” sketched there in particular. That sketch has prompted one critic to read Berryman’s study as “substantially a self-portrait” and “the product of an irresponsible countertransference.”¹⁹ In other words, Berryman’s *Stephen Crane* has been read in terms similar to those used in discussing *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, that focus on what the text reveals about the poet’s psychology and personal life and pay scant attention to its broader social and cultural concerns. Investigations of the former kind are interesting but in the case of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* they ignore Berryman’s claim, in “One Answer to a Question: Changes,” that the poem “*is a historical poem*”. (FP 329; Berryman’s emphasis) It is often forgotten that Berryman later admitted that the “psychological findings” he “threw” into his study of Crane were simplistic: “I know nothing of Freud,” he wrote in the Preface to the revised edition of *Stephen Crane* in December 1961.²⁰ When Berryman asked “Who knows how many origins a deep work has?” he was clearly casting a cold eye over his own efforts to reveal the psychological centre of Crane’s work.

Less than ten years after Farrar, Straus and Cudahy published *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in book form, Berryman complained that critics had “overconsider[ed] such matters [as the] extended witch-seductress and demon-lover bit” in the poem, before going on to describe the importance of his examination of “the turbulence of the modern world, and memory, and wants” in *The Dream Songs*. (FP 329) The exploration of physical need and sexual desire (“wants”) is continuous with Berryman’s treatment of the theme of “the turbulence of the modern world” in *The Dream Songs*. The subject of

“the turbulence of the modern world,” however, is also central to Berryman’s interrogation of the American self in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, where he develops the critique of contemporary culture initiated in many poems of *The Dispossessed*. Discussions of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in terms of Berryman’s marital and sexual life have directed critical attention away from important questions concerning the complex intertextual nature of the poem, but they have also reinforced the narrow confessional approach that continues to characterise interpretations of Berryman’s later work in particular.²¹ Warner Berthoff, for example, has argued that: “The idiosyncratic voicing of Berryman’s *Dream Songs* [...] traces back through *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in 1956 to a sonnet sequence written at the end of the 1940s out of excruciating personal trouble”.²² By focusing on what Berthoff calls “the contours of private recollection”,²³ many commentators have ignored Berryman’s cultural/political engagements in the poem and focused instead on the turn inward that is often, if erroneously, perceived as the main feature of confessional poetry.

(ii)

Berthoff’s description of Berryman’s poetic development is wildly misleading, and not least in terms of its dogmatic grounding of Berryman’s later work in his 1947 extra-marital affair. More troubling, however, are Berthoff’s ideological misrepresentations of Berryman’s pronouncements on poetry from the essay “From the Middle and Senior Generations,” which was first published in 1959. Describing the United States as “a historic commonwealth *uniquely* conscious of its origins in self-convened public deliberations and renegotiable civic compromises”,²⁴ Berthoff advances a clearly exceptionalist argument about the nature of American culture when he argues that, “A certain shared ‘jealousy for the national *honor*,’ which Berryman took to be one of the chief motives for a serious poetry, has guided [American] critical reflection”²⁵ since Colonial times. Berthoff misrepresents Berryman on a number of counts. To begin

with, he conveniently overlooks Berryman's anglicised spelling of "honour" in the original essay—and in *Dream Song 26*, where Henry's "jealousy for the honour (alive) of his country" is described. Spelling mattered to Berryman, as Charles Thornbury notes in the "Editorial guidelines on mechanics and spelling" prepared for Berryman's *Collected Poems*. (CP 296) "Like Henry," Thornbury writes, "Berryman delighted in the play and undercurrents of foreign and rarely used words, and he drew upon a baker's dozen of English, American, French, German, Italian, and Latin spellings, phrases, and usages." (CP 296) It is significant, then, that Berryman retained the English spelling of "honour" in an essay that was first published in *The American Scholar*,²⁶ because it signalled his sense of separateness from mainstream American criticism. The English spelling of "honour" was also retained by Robert Giroux when he edited Berryman's essays for *The Freedom of the Poet*, first published posthumously for an American market in 1976. Giroux clearly appreciated the fact that Berryman's use of English spelling when discussing "the national honour" was crucial to the kind of linguistic "play" recognised by Thornbury. Berryman's insertion of the letter *u* very subtly destabilises the exceptionalist rhetoric that informs Berthoff's argument.

Because an American academic press published his study, Berthoff may not be entirely responsible for the removal of the letter *u* from Berryman's "honour." Nevertheless, a more serious problem concerns his general misrepresentation of the remarks made by Berryman in his essay. Berthoff claims that Berryman took " 'jealousy for the national honor' [...] to be one of the chief motives for a serious poetry'.²⁷ Berryman makes no such claim in his essay. In the original essay Berryman attempts to list some of "the motives for making poetry" but no single "motive" is described as "chief," and Berryman does not claim that his list is exhaustive. Rather, he offers some suggestions about how poetry is made, cautioning the reader that "The motives for

making poetry have regularly been complex beyond analysis”, before offering the following examples:

love of the stuff and of rhythm, the need to invent, a passion for getting things right, the wish to leave one’s language in better shape than one found it, a jealousy for the national honour, love for a person or for God, attachment to human possibility, pity, outletting agony or disappointment, exasperation, malice, hatred.

(FP 312)

Berryman did not believe that any one of these individual “motives” for writing poetry was more important than the rest, and he clearly did not consider “a jealousy for the national honour” a “chief” motive, as Berthoff puts it.

The phrase “jealousy for the national honour” is in itself ambiguous, however, and it describes something of the ambivalence towards American culture and society that marked Ezra Pound’s career, in particular. Citing Pound’s description of John Quinn, “American by birth, not by way of life”, Peter Makin has argued that “there is a desire to sweep all of [Pound] into the American bucket [while] some of his aspects have not been well shown to belong there.”²⁸ The same could be said of Berryman. Berthoff places Berryman in a tradition of American poetry that holds “the renewal of the mythic promise of American life central to its mission.”²⁹ Nothing could be further from the truth where Berryman’s poetry is concerned. Berthoff writes:

This distinctive American intention in literature comes down to us in a famous succession of texts and pronouncements. It speaks, heroically enough, in Emerson’s call for an American genius who would establish for his time and place a “new confession”; in Melville’s excited vision of young writers “not very much inferior to Shakespeare” incubating in the American backlands; in Whitman’s genial prophecy of a poet “commensurate with his people,” whose country “absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it”—and not less heroically in the young Pound’s whirlwind campaign for an “American Risorgimento,” or in Henry James’s early resolve [...] not to go along scraping secondhand surfaces but to “turn out something handsome from the very heart of simple human nature.”³⁰

When he writes later on that “the criticism of literature cannot escape serving [...] a *political* as well as an aesthetic or metaphysical or psychological-sentimental interest”,³¹ it

is clear that the political interest Berthoff has in mind has been influenced by the ideology of American exceptionalism. Berthoff's selective survey of authors who express what he calls the "distinctive American intention in literature" is grounded in the kind of genealogical model of cultural inheritance that informs the exceptionalist narratives of American literary history described in the first chapter of this study. In its failure to appreciate the complexity and deep-seated cultural antagonism of what he calls "the young Pound's whirlwind campaign for an 'American Risorgimento' " the isolationist imperative implicit in Berthoff's project can be readily discerned.

Poetry written out of a feeling of "jealousy for the national honour" suggests a poetry informed by a sense of patriotic duty towards the nation. In the preceding chapter, however, Berryman's general rejection of the patriotic attitude was described in a number of his early works, and it is summarised by his frank statement "I *hate* America" in "The American Intellectual and the American Dream."³² Berryman's sense of the pervasiveness of "anti-patriotism" in the history of American literature is explored in some detail in another unpublished essay, "Africa: Some Notes on Modern Fiction."³³ In this essay he suggests that "Few critics would deny, except as patriots, that a profound dissatisfaction with American life, by our writers, is so prominent a feature of our intellectual history as almost to be worth considering characteristic." He continues:

It goes back at least to Washington Irving and Hawthorne, and their passages are violent. Sometimes it has taken the form of impatience with America as an audience for art, sometimes the form of contempt for it as a subject, sometimes the form of personal dislike and rejection; but essentially it is one thing, an anti-patriotism.

Repeating some of the points made in "The American Intellectual and the American Dream," Berryman highlights the undervalued political dimension of American writing in general in this piece, but he also signals the "anti-patriotic" element in his own work which—with regard to *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*—is more crucially concerned with exploring the relationship between America's colonial past and its Cold War present than

it is with providing a thinly disguised account of a love affair turned sour, as many critics suggest.

Berryman clearly has Pound in mind when he describes “anti-patriotism” as a “form of impatience with America as an audience for art”, and Berryman’s contact with Pound at this time was crucial to the development of his anti-exceptionalist cultural politics. The publication of *The Pisan Cantos* by New Directions in 1948 coincided with the publication of Berryman’s first major collection, and the opening of Canto LXXIV—“The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant’s bent shoulders”³⁴—may be read alongside Berryman’s descriptions of displacement and disaffection in *The Dispossessed*. More pertinently, Berryman clearly empathised with Pound’s antagonism towards mainstream American culture, and with what has been described as Pound’s “bitter attack on cultureless America” in *Patria Mia* (1913).³⁵ Following Pound’s example, Berryman learned that “A work of art need not contain any statement of a political or of a social or of a philosophical conviction, but it nearly always implies one”.³⁶ Berryman’s engagement with Pound during the late 1940s and into the 1950s was an important factor in the development of the interrogative political stance that began as a rejection of American authority which was embodied in the self-conscious turn towards Yeats made at the start of his career. Pound, indeed, made a similar move early in his career when, “disillusioned with American poetic provincialism and seeking a vast education in *Kultur*,”³⁷ he moved to Europe in 1908. Berryman claimed that Pound made the journey because he “wanted to learn from Yeats how to write poetry, in the belief that no one then living knew more about it.” (*FP* 254) Pound, however, was fully aware of the ideological implications of such movements and, as Makin has written, “The America that Pound experienced in his passionate youth was a looking *out*.”³⁸

2. Berryman's contact with Pound and *The Twentieth Century*

(i)

In a letter to William Carlos Williams in 1917, Pound described his American heritage as a “virus”: “I (*der grosse Ich*) have the virus, the bacillus of the land in my blood, for nearly three bleating centuries.”³⁹ Pound’s description of his American (Puritan) heritage in these terms echoes his description of “this vegetable bondage of blood” which he set his work “against” in the early poem “Commission.”⁴⁰ Becoming involved with Pound during the late 1940s, Berryman drew on the example of the older poet’s antagonism towards mainstream isolationist culture in his own poetic interrogations of the American self, so that Pound’s injunction to his poems to “Be against all sorts of mortmain”⁴¹ may be read as a covert epigraph to Berryman’s breakthrough poem of cultural and historical interrogation, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. This is not to suggest that either Berryman or Pound attempted to deny the fact that they were American in their work. Rather, in their poetry they took the fact of their Americanness as a fundamental point of inquiry.

Although many of his contemporaries viewed him as one of the most promising poets of his generation, Berryman himself felt somewhat alienated from the mainstream American literary and cultural scene when *The Dispossessed* was published in 1948. In October of that year, for example, he was invited to a party at the Gotham Book Mart in New York for the English writers Dame Edith and Sir Osbert Sitwell. Berryman attended the party but he refused to be included in the famous *Life* magazine group photograph. In a letter to his mother in December 1948, he said that he had gone to the party but that it was “indescribable”: “I went, but I couldn’t face getting in the photographs—with W[illiam] Rose Bennett sitting there like a mummy & [Randall] Jarrell blazing with ambition down on the right—so I didn’t.”⁴² The fact that Berryman had won the Poetry Society of America’s Shelley Memorial Award for *The Dispossessed* did not assuage his general sense of estrangement from the contemporary scene. As far as he

was concerned, he did not fit in. Berryman's advocacy of Pound, then, another outsider, comes as no surprise when one considers the intensity with which he felt himself apart from contemporary American society and culture. Indeed, Berryman's decision to name his "colonial" poem *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* may be read as an acknowledgement of the role that Pound played during this period of his career by echoing the titles of Pound's homages (*Homage to Sextus Propertius* and *Homage to Quintus Septimius Florens Christianus*). As Alan Holder puts it, "the title [of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*] would seem to be no accident, but, rather, an act of homage by the younger poet to the master."⁴³

In December 1948, Wallace Stevens' "most exciting correspondent,"⁴⁴ the Cuban poet José Rodríguez Feo, wrote to Stevens from Princeton with the news that he had met Berryman:

I met John Berryman, a mad chap, why? Well, I heard him recite Pound with a fervour and I was moved. I admire him then. I don't like his poetry, but I think he reads Pound (recites Pound) like he deserves with a sort of fanatical entonation [sic].⁴⁵

Something of Feo's description of Berryman's "fervour" was later recorded by Robert Lowell in his "surely misplaced image" of Berryman "sitting on the floor hugging his knees, and asking with shining cheeks for Pound to sing an aria from his opera *Villon*,"⁴⁶ when Berryman and Lowell visited Pound at St Elizabeth's earlier the same year. Lowell remembered that "[Berryman] saw nothing nutty about Pound, or maybe it was the opposite."⁴⁷ Lowell's memory of Berryman "hugging his knees" before Pound does not describe the more serious side of their relationship. In fact, Berryman conducted a prolonged correspondence with Pound in the late 1940s, and he was an important contact with the outside world for him during the early years of Pound's detention in St Elizabeth's.

One consequence of Berryman's correspondence with Pound was that James Laughlin of New Directions commissioned him to edit a selection of Pound's work. In a

letter to Berryman written in June 1947 Laughlin wrote that “Ezra would like to have you be the editor for the volume of his selected poems to go in the New Classics Series.”⁴⁸ In another letter written in August of the following year, Laughlin explained that: “The whole purpose of this book is to get people to look at Pound the poet, to clear their minds of Pound the wacky, or Pound the traitor, so we might just as well make the pudding as succulent as possible, don’t you think?”⁴⁹ The “pudding” that Laughlin referred to was, of course, the book itself, which he planned to include “the most famous pieces [by Pound] that are in the anthologies, because [...] people always want to see again the ones they know”.⁵⁰ Although *New Directions* decided not to use Berryman’s introduction to Pound’s work in the end—Berryman published his essay in the *Partisan Review* in April 1949 instead—Pound considered Berryman an important young writer and at one point he proposed that Berryman join forces with Charles Olson to form the nucleus of a group such as that constituted by Pound and H.D. in London a few decades earlier.

Many of Pound’s letters to Berryman were transcribed by Dorothy Pound (the poet’s wife), or communicated by other Poundian acolytes, such as Olson. In an undated letter to Berryman, probably written early in 1947, Pound told Berryman that he should “group and agree with 3 men, as to what should be DONE. directio voluntatis. [sic] Then get 3 or 4 more.”⁵¹ Following a meeting with Pound in February 1947, Olson wrote to Berryman (in a letter that displays Pound’s early influence on Olson’s writing) that: “We had it out again yesterday: ‘Damn! yr. / generootion must find its own... ‘Hang together or... ‘Set up correspondence, committees of... (public safety?) ...‘circular letters, we did, London, 1912, Louis Zukowski.... He [Pound] badgers. [...] Sez he: now Berryman, 1 of 4, 5 serious. [all sic]”⁵² In a later letter to Berryman in March 1947, Olson (this time less imitative of Pound’s idiosyncratic epistolary style) explained that the incarcerated poet “craves letters from you [i.e. Berryman] and a few more but he

also wants you and me [i.e. Olson] to make five with Allen, Spencer, West, and circulate letters, robin round [sic] or otherwise, among ourselves.”⁵³ Berryman did not collaborate with Olson on the project proposed by Pound however. Instead, in an undated letter to Pound from the same period, he made it quite clear that he did not see Olson as one of his peers, naming instead Dylan Thomas, Delmore Schwartz, and Robert Lowell as his “contemporaries.”⁵⁴

Berryman’s sense of community with Thomas may be read as an aspect of his anti-isolationist cultural politics: by recognising Thomas as a closer contemporary than Olson, Berryman made a small but significant contribution to the project of extending the boundaries of American literary culture against what Geoffrey Hartman has called the compulsive “purging [of] Europe from America” that has been at the heart of mainstream American cultural ideology since Colonial times.⁵⁵ In this sense Berryman, like Pound, was a traitor, because his cultural politics sought to undermine the idea of the “representative American self” that, as Sacvan Bercovitch has argued, “For well over two centuries [...] subsumed the facts of social pluralism (ethnic, economic, religious, even personal) in a comprehensive ideal”.⁵⁶ In his 1947 essay “Robert Lowell and Others” (originally published as “Lowell, Thomas & Co.”), Berryman wrote that Thomas’s work represented a “spiritual movement forward, sometimes represented as flight, toward *light* or freedom.” (FP 293) These words are echoed in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (first published in the year of Thomas’s death), in the image of the “sourcing...firefly” with which the poem closes: “Hover, utter, still, / a sourcing whom my lost candle like the firefly loves.” (CP 147) Andrew Marvell’s poem “The Mower to the Glow-worms” is very subtly alluded to here, and the ending of Marvell’s poem in particular: “For she my mind hath so displaced / That I shall never find my home.”⁵⁷ The allusion is significant because, in the first instance, Marvell was a close contemporary of Anne Bradstreet—she was born in or around 1612, Marvell in 1621. Moreover, Berryman once described

Homage to Mistress Bradstreet as “an essentially seventeenth-century poem with twentieth-century interpolations,”⁵⁸ which suggests that the poem may be read as a literary historical interjection into the world of Bradstreet and Marvell, while remaining engaged with more recent figures such as Thomas. Crucially, the intertextuality and contextual heterogeneity of Berryman’s poem undermines the subsumption of “the fact of social pluralism” by the “representative ideal” described by Bercovitch, offering instead a demythologised version and vision of the American self in terms of plurality and polyphony.

(ii)

Two years before *Bradstreet* was completed, Berryman attempted to write a play “on the subject of political treachery.” His idea, as Haffenden describes it, was “to probe the mentality of a traitor, for which models included the Irish patriot James Connolly, Ezra Pound, and the recent disclosures about Burgess and Maclean.”⁵⁹ As Berryman wrote in his notes for the play:

He [the traitor] is disillusioned w. Amer. capitalists *and* labor; hates U.S. in fact, though he does not fully know this, not—however—really hate as much as he says & acts. There is no Russian enthusiasm whatever involved. Wants *peace*... He is taken in by the final conception of internationalism, & victimized by the exaggerated anti-patriotism to which American intellectuals were schooled in the '30's [sic]. Man my age or a little more, v. familiar with our mistakes before the War, corruption during, and weakness since. Communists as anti-fascist, important to him. An intensely cultivated, able, sympathetic man: detests Amer. culture, parody-democracy & inefficiency, but is suffering also reaction to humanitarianism (dangers of world-view) tho' he hates American luxury-prosperity.⁶⁰

Berryman’s note regarding the traitor’s disillusionment with “American capitalists and labor,” is reminiscent of the overtly political poems of his early career. The sentiments expressed in these notes are similar to those articulated in “The American Intellectual and the American Dream,” which was written a few years earlier in November 1947. Both pieces, written at the approximate times that Berryman was starting and completing

Pound believed that fascism could achieve a social good and, as Carroll F. Terrell has pointed out, the opening of this Canto “may refer to Mussolini’s promise in 1934 that every Italian peasant would have a house of his own in 80 years.”⁶⁷ Terrell also notes that Digenos (or Dionysus) was “born twice” in the Greek legend, but that nowhere in history is there a record of one who was “twice crucified,” as Pound believed Mussolini and his mistress (Claretta Petacci or “la Clara”) had been by being first shot and then hanged from lampposts in Milan.

The title of Hillyer’s article, however, “Treason’s Strange Fruit” draws attention to the fact that Hillyer, like most American commentators, was less bothered by Pound’s fascism *per se* as much as he was affronted by Pound’s blatant anti-American attitude. Throughout his career Pound had written against what in Canto LXXIV he calls “the stupidity of the populace”⁶⁸ and his call for an “American Risorgimento”⁶⁹ was born out of his sense that mainstream American culture was stagnant and empty. Berryman did not support Pound’s fascism, but he did appreciate the older writer’s sense of the cultural vacancy that pervaded the contemporary American scene, as “The American Intellectual and the American Dream” demonstrates. When the *Saturday Review* refused to publish Berryman’s letter in defence of Pound, he sent it instead to the *Nation*, and in December 1949 the letter was published. It included a condemnation of the *Saturday Review* for its “prepared attack on modern poetry and criticism, impugning not only the literary reputation but the personal character of some of its foremost writers.”⁷⁰ Berryman, however, was fully aware of the ideological project undertaken by Pound in *The Pisan Cantos*, in terms of its criticisms of contemporary American culture.⁷¹

Berryman’s later description of Wallace Stevens as “that funny money-man” in Dream Song 219 might be more appropriately applied to Pound, who was preoccupied by economic theories and American fiscal policy. In Dream Song 219 Berryman revisits the claim he makes in “The Poetry of Ezra Pound” regarding the relationship between

“imagination” and “reality” in Stevens’ poetry (“That metaphysics / he hefted up until we could not breathe / the physics”). In the essay that was originally commissioned as an introduction to a selection of Pound’s work Berryman wrote that:

Pound is his own subject *qua* modern poet; it is the experience and fate of this writer “born / In a half savage country, out of date,” a voluntary exile for thirty years, that concern him. Another distinction is necessary. Wallace Stevens has presented us in recent years with a series of strange prose documents about “imagination” and “reality.” If Stevens’s poetry has for substance imagination, in this dichotomy, Pound’s has for substance reality.

(FP 263)

Berryman’s early poetry was centrally concerned with expressing a sense of the harsh realities of the 1940s in America, a period he described as “the decade of Survival.” In the early 1950s, then, Pound’s poetry, with its emphasis on “reality” over “imagination,” was a much more attractive model to Berryman than the “metaphysical” effusions of Stevens. Moreover, as a poet of self-exile and cultural displacement, and as an American who could admit that his country was both “half-savage” and “out of date,” Pound obtained a high place in Berryman’s estimate precisely because he expressed the same sense of disaffection and disillusionment, of “anti-patriotism,” that marked the younger poet’s attitude to contemporary American culture.

(iii)

Drawing on Pound’s example of anti-patriotism and antagonism towards mainstream American authority in *The Pisan Cantos*, then, Berryman formulated his own critique of contemporary American culture in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. Berryman interrogates the Puritan origins of the American self by focusing on the figure of Anne Bradstreet, the “tenth muse” or archetypal cultural icon of the American experience. It is interesting to note, however, that Berryman could not complete *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* before he finished both his essay on Pound and his study of Stephen Crane. In December 1948, he wrote to his mother that he had “finished the Pound introduction (three times I

finished it) & sent it off yesterday”, but he went on: “Now I have a nightmare month, one month, to finish *Crane* which is absolutely promised for Christmas. Then I am more my own man. This winter I think I will write verse, and the hell with everything. Teaching bores me to the soul but it destroys only two days. What I *can't* stand is this long burden of Pound & Crane.”⁷² By the following autumn, however, Berryman had still not completed his study of Crane. Finally, in October 1949 he reported: “Nothing done but very near *Crane*-end, a few days I hope.”⁷³ *Stephen Crane* was delivered to William Sloan Associates at the end of November 1949 and published in 1950.

Both the study of Crane and the essay on Pound fulfilled important functions in Berryman's preparations for the writing of the longest and most adventurous poem of his career to date. His study of Crane, despite its finally disappointing forays into textbook psychoanalysis, augmented Berryman's sense of the importance of context and environment in the creation of art, which is related to his understanding of Pound's appreciation of “reality” over “imagination.” Berryman saw in the figures of Pound and Crane two of the most important critics of mainstream American culture. In his reading of Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* he attends to the way that Crane was “describing a modern slum-world, ferocious and sordid, with a fidelity that reached down to Pete's amiable reminiscence”.⁷⁴ Crane's exposition of American social poverty in texts such as *Maggie* is reiterated by Berryman in “The American Intellectual and the American Dream” where he describes “the grossness & ugliness & emptiness” of modern American life. In terms of his understanding of contemporary culture, Berryman's contact with Pound reinforced his sense of the “organized and powerful anti-intellectual culture, or quasi-culture” described in the same piece.

Rather than join Olson in the founding of a new journal that would articulate these criticisms of American society and culture, in March 1947 Berryman wrote to Walter Stewart, an economist and member of the Institute for Advanced Study at

Princeton, in an attempt to rally support for “a new, authoritative instrument of documentation and enquiry” that would fill the void opened up since “the death of *The Criterion* before the war” and offer an alternative to “the mediocrity of the *Yale Review* and *Virginia Quarterly*.”⁷⁵ Berryman explained that:

When these magazines have been good, they have represented a single tradition, that of the Southern critics: *The American Review*, the *Southern*, the *Kenyon*, the *Sewanee*. The tradition seems to me to be exhausted; and this sense was decisive against my accepting when Tate asked me to take over the *Sewanee* last year. A fifth Tate-oriented quarterly, indeed, is being set up by three of his students (one is wealthy), but I cannot expect this to have any more relation to our real need than Luce’s ever-rumored literary magazine or the fact that *Poetry*, with new Chicago support, is raising its rates. Miscellaneous reviews to print good and fairly good work are not lacking, *Accent* being the most useful. We need a number of these, but we need something else as well.

Further on in his letter, Berryman argued that the *Partisan Review* was “the best thing we have,” but he still believed that it was “essential that we get something different and if possible better.” As noted earlier in this study, Berryman’s movement away from the New Critics and the “single tradition [...] of the Southern critics” as the 1940s advanced was significant, not least because it signalled his alignment with a more politically engaged group of critics associated with the *Partisan Review*, such as Philip Rahv, Mary McCarthy, and Dwight Macdonald, but more specifically because it meant that the New Critical view of the poem as a self-contained ahistorical and apolitical artefact was unacceptable to Berryman’s sense of poetry’s critical agency. As he puts it in his study of Crane: “Poetry begins—as a practical matter, for *use*.”⁷⁶

Berryman proposed to write “a study of the deficiencies of the school of critics which has dominated,” (i.e. the New Critics) and he suggested that the aims of the new review would be: “(1) to create a standard of independence, originality, learning, and literacy, not now existing in this country; (2) to bring into being at a high level critical work which as things stand now we shall not get; (3) to call attention to whatever is being done seriously either here or abroad in areas of enquiry at present without

intercommunication.”⁷⁷ Berryman’s attempts to raise capital for *The Twentieth Century*, however, came to nothing. Nevertheless, his inability to convince potential investors of the necessity for such a new organ of dissemination and critique did not mean that Berryman suddenly gave up on the ideas advanced in his letter. Rather, many of those ideas about the state of American culture and society are incorporated into the argument of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, where Berryman draws on his engagements with Pound and Crane to formulate the critique he believed *The Twentieth Century* would have provided if it had been established. *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, in other words, attempts to accomplish what Berryman had proposed as the critical agenda for the new journal: “to discover which currents matter and to encourage them; to open shams; to supply information, to bring together, to see freshly and rationally”.⁷⁸

3. “I hear a famisht howl”: *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in the 20th Century

(i)

In his attempts to raise funding for *The Twentieth Century* in 1947 Berryman referred to T. S. Eliot’s journal *The Criterion* as an example of what was needed to address the vacuity he discerned in contemporary American culture. Although Eliot’s “influence” on Berryman was denied by the poet in interviews throughout his career—in a 1970 interview with Peter Stitt for the *Paris Review*, for example, he alleged that he had “refused to meet Eliot on three occasions in England” and that he “had to fight shy of Eliot”⁷⁹—Berryman named Eliot with Pound in his essay “The American Intellectual and the American Dream” as one of the “dominant artistic influences” of his generation. Reflecting on the composition of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in 1965 Berryman wrote that: “when I finally woke up to the fact that I was involved in a long poem, one of my first thoughts was: Narrative! let’s have narrative, and at least one dominant personality, and no fragmentation! In short, let us have something spectacularly NOT *The Waste Land*, the

best long poem of the age.” (FP 327) In his acceptance speech for the National Book Award, which he was awarded for *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* in 1969, Berryman reiterated this claim, stating that he had “set up the *Bradstreet* poem as an attack on *The Waste Land*: personality, and plot—no anthropology, no Tarot pack, no Wagner.”⁸⁰ Despite these strong claims against Eliot’s influence, however, Berryman’s writing frequently converges with Eliot’s at important junctures.

In a commentary on “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” for example, first published in 1960,⁸¹ Berryman claimed that “modern poetry” begins with the line “Like a patient etherised upon a table....” (FP 270). Echoes of some of the passages from Eliot’s “Burnt Norton” may be discerned in many poems of *The Dispossessed*. Eliot’s lines, “Here is a place of disaffection / Time before and time after / In a dim light...”⁸² from the third section of “Burnt Norton” are alluded to in the opening lines of “The Spinning Heart,” for example, which pick up on the image of “the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves” in the first section of Eliot’s poem. Writing about the opening lines of “Burnt Norton,” C. K. Stead has suggested that, “Hearing a recording of Eliot reading them perhaps revives a faint sense of music” which “might be heard equally if Eliot solemnly read aloud some of his *Criterion* commentaries, which would represent the same anxious and bloodless state of mind.”⁸³ Stead’s comparison of “Burnt Norton” with some of the commentaries that Eliot wrote for the *Criterion* suggests a connection between Eliot’s poetry and critical prose that allows Berryman’s attempt to rescue the impetus behind *The Twentieth Century* to be read into the writing of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. Berryman may have “set up the *Bradstreet* poem as an attack on *The Waste Land*,” but in many respects *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* borrows a great deal from Eliot’s example.

There may be no “Tarot pack” or “Wagner” in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, but the annotations are present, as well as the wide range of references to literary, and non-

literary, sources. The narrative fragmentation of *The Waste Land* is countered in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* by the presence of one “dominant personality” as Berryman put it, but in its exploration of the displacement and failure that has so frequently been evaded in literary reflections on the origins of the American self, Berryman’s poem converges with Eliot’s downcast description of modernity in both *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*. Another allusion to Eliot’s poetry in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* may be discerned in the sixth stanza, for example, which describes the death by drowning of “young Henry Winthrop”:

(delivered from the waves; because he found
off their wigwams, sharp-eyed, a lone canoe
across a tidal river,
that water glittered fair & blue
& narrow, none of the other men could swim
and the plantation’s prime theft up to him,
shouldered on a glad day
hard on the glorious feasting of thanksgiving) drowned.

(CP 134)

Coming less than ten lines after the poet’s voice has “modulated” into that of Mistress Bradstreet at the end of the fourth section, and the poet’s vision of the Puritan poetess arriving on the *Arbella* “Pockmarkt & westward staring on a haggard deck” (CP 133), this section of Berryman’s poem clearly alludes to the “Death by Water” section of *The Waste Land* and Eliot’s lines, “Gentile or Jew / O you who turn the wheel and look to windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.”⁸⁴ Unlike Phlebas, whose corpse is picked to a skeleton underwater (“A current under sea / Picked his bones in whispers”⁸⁵), Henry Winthrop’s body is reclaimed from the Atlantic. Nevertheless, this early loss casts a gloom over the Colony’s first thanksgiving, and the ghosts of Henry Winthrop and those others who died during the crossing of the *Arbella* return later on in the poem: “in delirium of the grand depths, giving away / haunters what kept me, / I breathe solid spray.” (CP 141)

Regarding Eliot's use of a pair of epigraphs drawn from the writings of Heraclitus in *Four Quartets*, John-Paul Riquelme has argued that Eliot "uses his learning not to draw attention to the self but instead to invoke experiences and meanings that are not primarily psychological". "Instead of stressing the poet's self," Riquelme argues, Eliot's uses of literary and philosophical references and allusions in his poetry "contribute to the poetic evocation of ideas that are not merely the self's wilfully controlled instruments."⁸⁶ Berryman's allusions to Eliot's poetry (and other literary and cultural) sources in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* fulfil a similar function by attempting to move critical attention away from "the poet's self" and promoting a more expansive reading of the text within a larger cultural and historical frame of reference. In her discussion of the ways that (post)modern narrative "points in two directions at once, towards the events being represented in the narrative and toward the act of narration itself", Linda Hutcheon has described what she terms "the doubleness of all historical narrative" so that "Neither form of representation can separate 'fact' from the acts of interpretation and narration that constitute them, for facts (though not events) are created in and by those acts."⁸⁷ In *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* Berryman complicates the general understanding of the factuality of historical narrative by situating the basic "facts" of Anne Bradstreet's life within a complex network of intertextual referents, thus promoting a destabilising effect both within the text and without.

Berryman discerned something of what Hutcheon terms the "complex intertextual cross-referencing" of modern writing when, in a discussion of Pound's poetry, he proclaimed as a general rule that "Poetry is a palimpsest." (*FP* 258) Hutcheon describes a process of writing that self-consciously questions and interrogates the relationship between (inter)textuality and history: "If the past is only known to us today through its textualized traces (which, like all texts, are always open to interpretation), then the writing of both history and historiographic metafiction becomes a form of

complex intertextual cross-referencing that operates within (and does not deny) its unavoidably discursive context.”⁸⁸ Within the text of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, Berryman sends signals that challenge the reader to question the authenticity of Anne Bradstreet’s “narrative.” The “whole” text of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, comes into being through Berryman’s presentation of what Hutcheon has called “textualized traces”. Shortly after Berryman had completed the first full draft of the poem in April 1953, he wrote to his mother that he had come upon the following passage from *The Letters of John Keats*, which supports this description of *Bradstreet*: “The innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its thousand materials before it arrives at that trembling delicate and snail-like [snail-horn] perception of Beauty.”⁸⁹ This passage suggests not only that Berryman was finally beginning to see the poem in its completed form, but that *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* was the result of an intense exchange between the poet’s “intellect” and “its thousand materials.” In Hutcheon’s terms, Berryman had discovered the “form of complex intertextual cross-referencing” that would define his work into the 1960s.

(ii)

The systematic use of allusion in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* encourages the reader to become what Udo Hebel has described as a “text archeologist,” expanding not only the primary text, as it were, but promoting expansive readings of it also. As Hebel has suggested:

The archeological activity of actualizing allusions leads to the verbalization and documentation of the potential associations they might trigger. The resulting compendium that will be especially important for historically or culturally removed texts serves to bridge presuppositional gaps and to stop intertextual erosion, not to limit a text’s semantic openness or to curb the theoretically unlimited and uncontrollable range of associations. The ensuing interpretation can, of course, no longer be considered a spontaneous act of reading, but turns into the deliberate attempt of an “informed” critic—the text archeologist—to restore the text’s associative verticality that purely syntagmatic readings are inclined to disregard.⁹⁰

Critics have treated *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* as if it were a “historically or culturally removed” text, to use Hebel’s terms, a text that does not engage with either history or culture. Moreover, the “associative” dimension of *Bradstreet*, in terms of its clear (and intended) intertextuality, has been largely ignored by critics who view it primarily as a description of an emotional or marital crisis. The strength of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* as Berryman’s breakthrough-poem may be described in very different terms, however, as a powerful poetic engagement with American history and contemporary (Cold War) culture. In other words, it may be situated alongside *The Waste Land* and *The Pisan Cantos*, which are generally regarded as “strong poems” as Stead has argued, “partly because they give us the maximum sense that an energetic and unique mind is engaging with an actual world.”⁹¹

One of the sections of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* that has commanded a great deal of critical attention is that from the middle of stanza 18 to the end of stanza 21, describing the birth of Anne Bradstreet’s daughter Sarah. The section begins with a description of Bradstreet’s realisation that she may be pregnant, her feelings of morning sickness and her desire to have children: “Unwell in a new way. Can that begin? / God brandishes. O love, O I love. Kin, / gather.” (CP 137) Three stanzas later the “anguish comes to an end” with the poetess asking, “Is that thing alive? I hear a famisht howl.” (CP 138) It has often been noted that Berryman likened the process of writing this section of the poem to that of “couvade,” whereby “the father of a newborn-to-be simulates the childbirth activities of the mother, including ‘experiencing’ in himself her physical pain.”⁹² As Joseph Mancini has documented:

“Couvade was always Henry’s favourite custom,” proclaims Henry in Dream Song 124. Apparently, Henry’s creator shared that preference: according to John Berryman’s first wife, Eileen Simpson, Berryman, having just finished the childbirth stanzas in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, exclaimed, “Well, I’m exhausted.... I’ve been going through the couvade. The little monster nearly killed me!”⁹³

Mancini goes on to apply the Jungian psychology of Nor Hall to Berryman's poem, reading it as an example of one of the poet's most successful attempts to sustain a "couvade consciousness" in his work.

Mancini presents *Bradstreet* as a poem that details "what Nor Hall describes as a 'palatial interior life, labyrinthine levels of meaning to explore, red niches to dig souls out of, and deep enclosures for his own not-yet-born' ".⁹⁴ Like many other critics who have tackled *Bradstreet*, Mancini concentrates on what the poem reveals about Berryman's emotional life, his psychological profile, and the psycho-sexual dramas between the poet and his mother, his first wife, and his father. Describing what he calls Berryman's "wombly art," Mancini argues that in writing *Bradstreet* Berryman was enabled to "both inseminate the poetic egg and use his mothering energy to hatch it."⁹⁵ This view of the creation of the poem ignores the important contextual issues that pertained to its eventual publication, presentation, and critical reception. Although he uses Berryman's manuscript materials well, Mancini proceeds in his analysis without once referring to the thirty-two notes that Berryman provided for the poem, which reveal as much if not more about the text's "palatial interior life" as the Jungian theories of Hall.

In his essay on Pound's poetry Berryman argued that "Poetry is a palimpsest." (*FP* 258) In *Dream Song 30* (written in 1958) Berryman describes Henry's interest in archaeology:

Collating bones: I would have liked to do.
Henry would have been hot at that.
I missed his profession.
As a little boy I always thought
'I'm an archeologist'; who
could be more respected peaceful serious than that?

Berryman's interest in archaeology is also registered in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, where a phrase from Gertrude Rachel Levy's archaeological study *The Gate of Horn* (1948)—"in the open river-drifts of the old world"⁹⁶—is quoted in the penultimate stanza. (*CP* 146)

Berryman's quotation from Levy's work is interesting for a number of reasons. Subtitled "*A study of the religious conceptions of the stone age, and their influence upon European thought*", Levy's research began in the 1930s when she was "attached to an expedition engaged in uncovering a group of archaeological sites in Iraq."⁹⁷ Levy's main concern, however, was to use archaeological findings to advance a theory about the ritualistic practices of Stone Age man. In her general attempt to speculate on the Neanderthal origins of later cultural and social practices, Levy's study provides an interesting context for reading Berryman's poem, which is similarly concerned with describing the origins of culture, albeit with respect to a very different "Old World" to that discussed in Levy's study.

When Levy writes about the "old world" (capital letters are not used in her text) she is referring to "the remote depths of the caves of Western Europe,"⁹⁸ whereas in Berryman's text the "Old World" refers to the world of England and Europe that Anne Bradstreet and the other passengers of the *Arbella* left behind when they settled in Massachusetts in 1630. Both *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and *The Gate of Horn*, however, are concerned with understanding the process by which history is written, and with teasing out the differences between what *was* real and what *is* imagined in the attempt to reconstruct the past. Berryman's reconstruction of Bradstreet's life in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* is only one aspect of a much more significant historical project, just as Levy's study attempts to provide an insight into aspects of culture that have been long forgotten over the course of the centuries. In his introduction to the Torchbook edition of *The Gate of Horn* in 1963, Henri Frankfort discussed the way the book's title drew attention to itself as a "visionary" work, as a text that expands the conventional sense of human history by suggesting some striking propositions about the origins of culture.⁹⁹ Frankfort wrote that "if the historian is a willing victim to contingency, resigned to the defects of his sources, his image of the past suffers from his self-imposed limitations." He continued: "To see that image completed by intuitive perception is a challenge and an

enrichment: it compels one to ask whether one has gone to the limits of permissible interpretation; it may reveal that one's understanding is deepened when these are passed.¹⁰⁰ Berryman's poem challenges and expands the "self-imposed limitations" of the exceptionalist version of American history and offers an alternative version of the mainstream (isolationist) "image of the past."

(iii)

The exceptionalist narrative of American history and culture points to both the beginning and the end of New World history, where the "beginning" refers to the successful seventeenth-century settlement of certain parts of America by English Puritans, and the "end" pertains to what Bercovitch has called "the new end-time Eden."¹⁰¹ That Edenic ideal has persisted in the American imagination for centuries, from the sermons of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Colonial ministers such as William Hubbard and Jonathan Edwards, to the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson in the nineteenth-century for whom, as Bercovitch has recorded, "America is a garden of plenty,...a magazine of power....Here is man in the Garden of Eden; here, the Genesis and the Exodus".¹⁰² The eighteenth-century preacher Edwards, best known for his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," described the Colonial settlements of the seventeenth century in terms of "the rising of a New Heaven and a New Earth in the New World", and (after Bishop Berkeley¹⁰³) he frequently praised what he called "the Westward course of Empire" in his writing.¹⁰⁴ It is significant, then, that in Berryman's description of Anne Bradstreet approaching the New World on the *Arbella*, she is described as "Pockmarkt & westward staring on a haggard deck" (*CP* 133), watching the "Garden of Eden" draw closer not with joy and delight, but with trepidation and fear. The anticipated sanctuary of a "new end-time Eden" is permanently deferred in Berryman's poem. Indeed, Berryman offers a bleak vision of contemporary American

society and culture by describing both the threat of nuclear holocaust and the problems of race conflict in the “New World”:

Headstones stagger under the great draughts of time
after heads pass out, and their world must reel
speechless, blind in the end
about its chilling star: thrift tuft,
whin cushion—nothing. Already with the wounded flying
dark air fills, I am a closet of secrets dying.
Races murder, foxholes hold men,
reactor piles wage slow upon the wet brain rime.

(CP 146)

Homage to Mistress Bradstreet was first published in the September-October 1953 issue of the *Partisan Review*. At the time Berryman was not bound by any major commitments to a publisher: a biography of Shakespeare contracted to Viking was in process but far from completion, and it was not until 1956 that *Bradstreet* was published in book form. In the previous year Robert Giroux left the publishing firm Harcourt, Brace to join the firm that was then known as Farrar, Straus and Cudahy. In April 1955 Giroux approached Berryman about the possibility of publishing *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. Moreover, Giroux wanted to begin the process of rejuvenating Farrar, Straus and Cudahy’s poetry list with Berryman’s poem, and in his letter he wrote that:

I want to build up the American list in general (I think our European list has great distinction), and the poetry list in particular. I would like to start with HOMAGE TO MISTRESS BRADSTREET. I can now sign contracts myself, and there will be none of the Harcourt, Brace ambivalence—editor proposing and management disposing. May I publish your poem?¹⁰⁵

Giroux went on to inform Berryman that he would be among “friends” at Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, who were then planning to publish a “Collected MacNeice” (which never materialised), as well as “Eliot’s new play” (*The Elder Statesman*), and “Cal Lowell’s [...] prose book” (which was not subsequently completed). Berryman signed a contract with Farrar, Straus and Cudahy for *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in June 1955, and it was finally published in book form in 1956. It subsequently won both the University of Chicago’s

Harriet Monroe Poetry Prize and a Rockefeller Fellowship in Poetry from the *Partisan Review*. Allen Tate wrote to Berryman that *Bradstreet* “adds a fourth to the three first-rate long poems by Americans in this century—the others being by Pound, Eliot, and Crane.”¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Berryman was disappointed by the general critical response to his poem and in a letter to his mother shortly after the book was published, he wrote that “A deafening silence seems to be greeting *AB*”.¹⁰⁷

It is difficult to understand precisely what Berryman meant when he wrote of the “deafening silence” that greeted *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*: after all, the poem was welcomed with almost unanimous praise by America’s most prominent literary critics, as well as being nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1956. No major review of the poem, however, dealt in any meaningful way with the poem as a book, and with the fact that the controversial left-wing painter Ben Shahn had provided a series of illustrations for it.¹⁰⁸ Stanley Kunitz ended his review of the book in *Poetry* with the one-sentence paragraph: “The book is handsomely designed and printed, with drawings by Ben Shahn.”¹⁰⁹ Most critics, however, ignored the design of the book and Shahn’s drawings altogether, despite the fact that they play an important role in the book as a whole, and extend the interpretative possibilities of the entire work. Obsessed by the idea that the poem represented a celebration of the Puritan origins of the American self on the one hand, and a thinly disguised confession of an actual love affair on the other, contemporary critics paved the way for subsequent evasions of the text’s important dialogue with history, and its critique of contemporary American society.

Although Berryman had completed the poem long before Shahn agreed to provide a series of illustrations for it, the collaborative aspect of the *book* is clearly stated on the cover: “JOHN BERRYMAN / *Homage to / Mistress Bradstreet / A poem, with pictures by Ben Shahn.*”¹¹⁰ Sometime after Shahn agreed to do the illustrations Bernarda Bryson Shahn wrote to Berryman on the painter’s behalf to say how glad he was that

Berryman liked them, adding that: “Ben would never be guilty of retracing the steps that word pictures have already made”, while recognising that “picturized poetry has a bad history” in general.¹¹¹ Berryman had written to Shahn to say that he believed the drawings “create a good counterpoint for [the] poem”, and Shahn replied that the “juxtaposition” (of picture and text) was “groundbreaking” and further, that the illustrations would “set a stark, lean New England mood in which the images and sensibilities of [the] poem can take place very much as New Englanders live within their very often fierce landscape without either bowing to the other.”¹¹²

Shahn may have overestimated the originality of the enterprise. Nevertheless, the correspondence between Berryman and Shahn reveals the extent to which both poet and painter viewed the project in terms of a collaboration: the poem may have been written two years before, but the *book* was a collaborative effort. That Berryman believed Shahn’s drawings created “good counterpoint” to the poem bears this out, and if Berryman believed that Shahn’s work was essentially in harmony with his own it is important to consider something of Shahn’s reputation at this time.¹¹³ Shahn was one of the most popular American painters of the period, representing the United States with Willem de Kooning at the Venice Biennale in 1954 and featuring on the cover of *Time* magazine both in 1955 and 1956. In 1954 he was profiled in a *Life* magazine cover story as a “Painter of Protest” and, more significantly, when his first major retrospective was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1947 Shahn’s work was recognised for its critical exposition of “the shortcomings of democracy in the United States.”¹¹⁴ The importance of the ideological dimension of Shahn’s work was restated in a review of a 1998 exhibition of his work at the Jewish Museum in New York. Entitled “Trying to Separate Ben Shahn’s Art from His Politics,” the review described the way that during the 1950s Shahn “became, in a sense, the country’s official leftist artist, or at least the

official artist for millions of Americans leaning to the left”.¹¹⁵ For his leftist “leanings” Shahn was brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1959.

Berryman was clearly making a particular set of claims for his own work when he arranged to have Shahn illustrate what was the most important publication of his career to date in 1956. Although Shahn’s illustrations were only used in the first Farrar, Straus and Cudahy edition of 1956, Berryman indicates the general importance of visual art to the creation of *Bradstreet* at a number of points in the text itself. In stanza 29, for example, the lines “sleepless, or a red shaft with a dreadful start / rides at the chapel, like a slipping heart” (CP 140) are said to be “After a Klee” (CP 147), and the description of “a male great pestle smash[ing] / small women swarming towards the mortar’s rim in vain” (CP 142) is annotated: “After an engraving somewhere in Fuchs’s collections.” (CP 148) Berryman’s references to Fr Rolfe’s description of Byzantine icons of the Virgin Mary in terms of “these unruffleable wan dolls in indigo on gold” in stanza 33 (CP 141) and to “the crabs & shells of my Palissy ewer” in stanza 28 (CP 139) further demonstrate the important role that visual and fine art played in the creation of “the colonial poem.” Berryman’s reference to a painting by Paul Klee in stanza 29 has a particular relevance. In 1924 Klee gave a speech at the opening of an exhibition of his work in which he described the ways that “his works should be read”.¹¹⁶ Klee’s piece was translated into English by Herbert Read and published by Faber and Faber in 1948. Read argued that “Klee, with a clarity and humility not characteristic of many of his contemporaries, realized that the individual effort is not sufficient.”¹¹⁷ In creating *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* Berryman expressed a similar belief, not least in terms of the self-conscious intertextuality of the poem, but his correspondence with Shahn also indicates the importance he attached to collaboration in contemporary art.

Berryman’s disappointment with the critical reception that was given to *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* when it was first published might then be explained in terms of the

general lack of attention that was paid to the poem's expansive literary and cultural allusiveness and, more specifically, his collaboration with Shahn. The enthusiastic reactions of mainstream critics such as Tate and Aiken meant little to Berryman, who was dismayed by the more troubling "silence" concerning the work's fundamental project of interrogation. Neither of these critics considered the importance of the range of collaborations that Berryman brought to bear on the creation of the poem, and the fact that Shahn had been recently described as an artist whose work refused to "celebrate America" did not deter them from describing it as a celebration of the American self, "a classic right on our doorstep" as Aiken put it.¹¹⁸

(iv)

When it was published, Stanley Kunitz suggested that *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* "lacked inherent imaginative grandeur."¹¹⁹ Berryman was dismayed by Kunitz's remark and in his acceptance speech for the National Book Award in 1969 he wondered aloud how he "dared lift [his] head [to] trouble the public again"¹²⁰ after the way that *Bradstreet* had been received in 1956. Comparing Berryman's project to that of Hart Crane in *The Bridge*, Kunitz suggested that Berryman was attempting "to relate himself to the past through the discovery of a viable myth, and to create for his vehicle a grand and exalted language, a language of transfiguration."¹²¹ Kunitz failed to realise that Berryman was less concerned with discovering "a viable myth" than he was with dismantling and interrogating a myth that was already long in existence, namely the myth of American exceptionalism. Like many others, ranging from the positively enthusiastic to the glibly appreciative, Kunitz misunderstood the fundamental critical project of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, the "troubling of the public" signalled by Berryman's collaboration with Shahn.

The closeness of that collaboration is evident on the first page of the 1956 edition of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. The drawing that also features on the book's cover, a wooden house at the edge of a forest, is placed opposite the title of the poem

and the first stanza. Picture and text occupy approximately the same amount of space on the page, thus reinforcing Berryman's claim regarding the contrapuntal relation between text and illustration. The bleakness evoked by Shahn's drawings is an apt representation of the fact that almost every one of the fifty-seven stanzas of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* reflects the hardship and precariousness of Bradstreet's life. Bradstreet is first "seen" in the fourth stanza of the poem, "Pockmarkt & westward staring on a haggard deck". (CP 133) The new world that awaits Bradstreet, however, is not the one she expects or has been promised: "Outside the New World winters in grand dark / white air lashing high thro' the virgin stands / foxes down foxholes sigh," he writes in the second stanza (CP 133), presaging the harrowing description of Bradstreet's first year in the New World in stanzas 7, 8, and 9. The journey across the Atlantic was itself fraught with calamity and fear for Bradstreet, as Berryman describes in the fifth stanza:

By the week we landed we were, most, used up.
Strange ships across us, after a fortnight's winds
unfavouring, frightened us;
bone-sad cold, sleet, scurvy; so were ill
many as one day we could have no sermons;
broils, quelled; a fatherless child unkennelled; vermin
crowding & waiting: waiting.

(CP 134)

If crossing the Atlantic was traumatic, however, their arrival in the New World provided no more comfort: just as the *Arbella* came in sight of land, "young Henry Winthrop [...] drowned." (CP 134) Their arrival in the New World marred by the death of young Henry Winthrop, the expected land of plenty turns out to be a place of starvation and disease: "How long with nothing in the ruinous heat, / clams & acorns stomaching, distinction perishing, / at which my heart rose, / with brackish water, we would sing." (CP 134)

In 1965 Berryman said *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* "laid itself out in a series of rebellions": "against the new environment and above all against her barrenness (which in

fact lasted for years), then against her marriage [...] and finally against her continuing life of illness, loss, and age.” (FP 328) The poem also enacts a further “series of rebellions”, however, against the formal strategies of Berryman’s early work on the one hand, and the exceptionalist model of American history and culture on the other. Bradstreet’s confrontation with the patriarchal authority of her father, and indeed the Pilgrim Fathers themselves, is representative of Berryman’s interrogation of mainstream isolationist American authority in *The Dispossessed* and “The American Intellectual and the American Dream.” In *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* Berryman allows Bradstreet to voice her uncertainties (and criticisms) of the colonial project. In stanza 8, for example, she admits that it is hard to believe that “beyond the Atlantic wound our woes enlarge” and she expresses some uncertainty about her ability to maintain trust in the leaders of her community:

Strangers & pilgrims fare we here,
declaring we seek a City. Shall we be deceived?
I know whom I have trusted, & whom I have believed,
and that he is able to
keep that I have committed to his charge.

(CP 134)

The long pause after “keep” suggests that Bradstreet’s faith is tentative, that it is being tested. Writing Bradstreet in terms of the Biblical figure of Ruth in the next stanza, Berryman describes a sense of despair that is bound up with Bradstreet’s feeling that God has abandoned her to a “Hard and divided Heaven” as it is described further on in stanza 36. (CP 141)

In stanzas 9 and 10 Berryman not only provides a clear sense of Bradstreet’s displacement in the New World (she is “Ruth / away”), but he also suggests that the poetess was sceptical about the claim that a New Jerusalem could ever be discovered or constructed in it:

Winter than summer worse, that first, like a file
 on a quick, or the poison suck of a thrilled tooth;
 and still we may unpack.
 Wolves & storms among, uncouth
 board-pieces, boxes, barrels vanish, grow
 houses, rise. Motes that hop in sunlight slow
 indoors, and I am Ruth
 away: open my mouth, my eyes wet: I would smile:

vellum I palm, and dream. Their forest dies
 to greensward, privets, elms & towers, whence
 a nightingale is throbbing.
 Women sleep sound. I was happy once..
 (Something keeps on not happening; I shrink?)
 These minutes all their passions & powers sink
 and I am not one chance
 for an unknown cry or a flicker of unknown eyes.

(CP 135)

The forest, dying “to greensward, privets, elms & towers,” threatens to overwhelm the Colonial project of constructing a New Jerusalem. The forest, indeed, is a dark and powerful presence throughout Berryman’s poem, as indicated by Shahn’s illustrations and the power of the collaborative effort between Berryman and Shahn is brought home in stanzas 16 and 17, where Shahn’s bleak black trees clearly contradict Bradstreet’s claim that “Food [is] endless” (CP 136) and draw attention to her half-fearful obsession with “these savage foresters // whose passionless dicker in the shade”.¹²² (CP 137) Situated above the stanza that begins “Food endless, people few, all to be done. / As pippins roast, the question of the wolves / turns & turns”, Shahn’s illustrations galvanise Berryman’s description of Bradstreet’s life in the New World in terms of uncertainty, doubt, disappointment, and fear.

At one point in the poem Bradstreet begs Death—“Satan’s ancient fere” in the first line of stanza 23 (CP 138)—to come and take her away: “Eat my sore breath, Black Angel. Let me die.” (CP 144) Berryman wrings out Bradstreet’s sufferings to the bitter end, however, and describes her smallpox in stanza 29: “the grey pocks / itch, a manic stench / of pustules snapping” (CP 140); her father’s death in stanza 43: “He keeps his

bed, / and threw a saffron scum Thursday” (*CP* 143); the burning of her house (“how many burned?”) in stanza 51 (*CP* 145); and finally her own death, that comes as a relief (“unfit, desirous, glad”) in stanza 53, when her voice fades and Berryman begins the “Coda” that ends the poem. (*CP* 146) When what Berryman describes as Simon and Anne Bradstreet’s “great new house” in stanza 51 burned down in 1666, the Puritan poetess wrote a poem where she considered the fire as an act of God:

In silent night when rest I took
For sorrow near I did not look
I waken’d was with thund’ring noise
And piteous shrieks of dreadful voice.
That fearful sound of “Fire!” and “Fire!”
Let no man know is my desire.
I, starting up, the light did spy,
And to my God my heart did cry
To strengthen me in my distress
And not to leave me succorless.
Then, coming out, beheld a space
The flame consume my dwelling place.
And when I could no longer look,
I blest His name that gave and took,
That laid my goods now in the dust.¹²³

In Berryman’s version of Bradstreet’s life, there is very little solace to be found in the word of God as it is mediated by the Pilgrim Fathers: “Forswearing it otherwise, they starch their minds. / Folkmoots, & blether, blether. John Cotton rakes / to the synod of Cambridge.” (*CP* 138) As a woman and the wife of an important member of the community, Anne Bradstreet was forced to accept the loquacious rhetoric of John Cotton’s sermons, but Berryman suggests that in private, at least, she thought of them as nonsense or “blether.”

Berryman’s refusal to celebrate Bradstreet’s remarkable faith and resilience against the terrible hardships of seventeenth-century New England, then, is translated into twentieth-century terms as a repudiation of Cold War isolationist rhetoric and exceptionalist ideology. When Bradstreet’s father dies Berryman has the poetess exclaim: “O far from where he bred!” (*CP* 143), suggesting that he longed for the England of his

youth as he neared death. In the penultimate stanza of the poem Berryman attempts to negate the entire Colonial enterprise by describing the early settlements as “drowned towns off England, / featureless as those myriads / who what bequeathed save fire-ash, fossils, burlled / in the open river-drifts of the Old World?” (CP 146) His claim that the Colonial Puritans “bequeathed” nothing but “fire-ash” and “fossils” suggests that the high ideals that Bradstreet lived for were worth nothing in the end, and especially in the twentieth century when the threat of nuclear holocaust has superseded Jonathan Edwards’ terrifying caution to Puritans such as Josiah Hawley, as Robert Lowell suggests in his poem “Mr. Edwards and the Spider.”¹²⁴ In that poem, as Jonathan Raban has remarked: “For Edwards, death signifies the abundant grace, justice and order of a living, if vengeful God”. For Lowell (and Berryman), however, as Raban continues, “death *is* a widow—in the twentieth century it has lost the consolation of the promise of an afterlife as it has lost the logic of a divine judgement.”¹²⁵

The birth-scene in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* may then be read as a metaphor for the nativity of the world’s most influential superpower, insatiable (“famisht”) in its pursuit of an ideal that remains in a state of perpetual deferral. The relentless pursuit of that ideal—represented by what Bercovitch terms the “new end-time Eden”¹²⁶—is described in the final two lines of the poem, “Hover, utter, still, / a sourcing whom my lost candle like the firefly loves.” (CP 147) As noted earlier, Berryman alludes to Marvell’s seventeenth-century meditation on displacement and homelessness “The Mower to the Glow-worms” in these lines, and to the last two stanzas of that poem in particular:

Ye glow-worms, whose officious flame
To wandering mowers shows the way,
That in the night have lost their aim,
And after foolish fires do stray;

Your courteous lights in vain you waste,
Since Juliana here is come,
For she my mind hath so displaced
That I shall never find my home.¹²⁷

While Marvell's poem, like Berryman's, may be read as a "homage" to the poet's mistress, it is also possible to consider it as an examination of internal exile and social and cultural displacement. In *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* Berryman describes Anne Bradstreet as a figure who was alienated from her community in Colonial New England, and—in the twentieth century—Berryman empathises with this feeling of disaffection. As he puts it in the second stanza of *Bradstreet*: "Both of our worlds unhand[ed] us." (CP 133)

(v)

In an interview in 1970 Berryman explained that his reading of Saul Bellow's novel *The Adventures of Augie March* in manuscript in the early 1950s was an important moment in the process of writing *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*.¹²⁸ Bellow's novel was published in 1953, the same year that *Bradstreet* was first published in *The Partisan Review*. Berryman believed that *The Adventures of Augie March* represented a turning point, both in the development of Bellow's career and in the history of twentieth-century fiction, and in a review of the novel he noted that all of its critics, whether "admiring" or "disapproving," recognised it as an "important" work. (FP 222) Considering what Berryman may have taken from Bellow's example in the creation of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, most critics have concentrated on the fact that the poem is an examination of a single personality, from which it obtains strength of focus and a sense of narrative continuity. For all of its apparent celebration of Americanness, however, Bellow's novel also contains an important critique of American culture, not least in its description of the displacement of the individual, but in terms of what Martin Corner has described as "the outward

movement away from the self-enclosure of discursively constructed consciousness to the otherness of the world” in Bellow’s fiction.¹²⁹

Berryman’s observation that Augie March “has no visible father (he is illegitimate) and can hardly follow in his footsteps” (*FP* 223) has an interesting parallel in his attempts to negate the patriarchal authority of Anne Bradstreet’s father and the Pilgrim Fathers (represented by John Cotton) in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. Bradstreet’s desire to reject patriarchy poses a potential challenge to the dominant narratives of American history—prescribed by Cotton and others—which promote the myth of exceptionalism and insist on cultural isolation. Bellow describes the “invention” of America in *The Adventures of Augie March*, and the process by which one “version” (i.e. the exceptionalist/isolationist version) of American identity supersedes all others:

The great chiefs and leaders recruit the greatest number, and that’s what their power is. There’s one image that gets out in front to lead the rest and can impose its claim to being genuine with more force than others. Then a huge invention, which is the invention maybe of the world itself, and of nature, becomes the actual world—with cities, factories, public buildings, railroads, armies, dams, prisons, and movies—becomes the actuality. That’s the struggle of reality, to recruit others to your version of what’s real. Then even the flowers and the moss on the stones become the moss and the flowers of a version.¹³⁰

In *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* Berryman offers a “version” of Anne Bradstreet’s life that encourages a consideration of alternative versions of American history. Using the terms initially proposed for *The Twentieth Century*, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* may be read as “an instrument of inquiry” in which Berryman utilises the life of Anne Bradstreet to expose the contradictions and anxieties inherent in the isolationist version of the American self. Berryman takes this *exceptional* figure—the “Tenth Muse”—and uses her to “see freshly” the American self in terms of doubt and division and, in the process, he describes his own “nightmares of Eden.”

4. Towards *The Dream Songs*

The “nightmares of Eden” that he describes in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, then, refer as much to Berryman’s experience of modern American society as they do to Anne Bradstreet’s experiences in Colonial New England. Philip Levine, a student of Berryman’s at Iowa University in 1954, later recalled that this “was the middle of the shittiest part of American life”.¹³¹ Berryman’s description of Cold War America as a nightmarish Eden in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* is echoed in Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* (also first published in book form in 1956) and in the “dream of life a nightmare” described in that poem:

Pilgrim State’s Rockland’s and Greystone’s foetid halls, bickering with the echoes
of the soul, rocking and rolling in the midnight solitude-bench dolmen-
realms of love, dream of life a nightmare, bodies turned to stone as heavy
as the moon....¹³²

Ginsberg’s vision of America here, as in much of his work, is unrelenting in its description of social and cultural poverty, and in its determination to expose New World hypocrisy. Considered retrospectively, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* did not create as much of a sensation as *Howl*. Both poems enact an interrogation of the American self, however, which though a common critical observation with respect to Ginsberg, is rarely granted in the case of Berryman.

In many ways Berryman was a more conservative poet than Ginsberg: he was an academic, he did not take hallucinogenic drugs, and he had little time for the Beat poets in general. Although his poetry lacks the declamatory openness that made (and still makes) Ginsberg’s contrary politics more immediately discernible, Berryman’s poetry is nonetheless astute in its criticisms of American society and culture. In *Bradstreet* Berryman depends rather too much on the reader to make the right associative leaps that will bring his critique of mainstream culture into focus. Not surprisingly, then, some critics have failed to appreciate the critical imperative of Berryman’s “colonial poem,”

and subsequently misread some of his more clearly political poems of the time as texts that affirm rather than refute the mainstream position. An interesting example of this is Berryman's poem "American Lights, Seen From Off Abroad," first published in *His Thought Made Pockets & the Plane Bucket* in 1958. (CP 157-9) Modelled on the traditional English nursery rhyme "Oranges and lemons / Say the bells of St. Clement's," "American Lights, Seen From Off Abroad" has been described by Paul Mariani as Berryman's patriotic response to the launch of the *Sputnik* satellite in 1957. Mariani suggests that the poet was "outraged by the launching of *Sputnik* on October 4"¹³³ and subsequently wrote the poem, which is dated "7 October 1957," in Lévantó (Spain) where Berryman was on holiday with his second wife Ann Levine and their son Paul. Contemplating the lights of America's major cities from Spain, however, Berryman appears to be more concerned with exposing the shallowness of modern American culture and society than he is with criticising the launch of *Sputnik* which—although it is alluded to in the lines "'Basketball in outer space' / sneers the White New Hampshire House" (CP 158)—is not directly referred to in the forty-two line poem.

The following lines from "American Lights, Seen From Off Abroad" suggest that Berryman viewed his home country with cynicism and scorn from his Spanish vantage point:

Blue go up & blue go down
to light the lights of Dollartown

Nebuchadnezzar had it so good?
Wink the lights of Hollywood

I never think, I have so many things,
flash the lights of Palm Springs

.....

I cannot quite focus
cry the lights of Las Vegas

(CP 157-58)

In these couplets Berryman is clearly less bothered by the presence of *Sputnik* in outer space than he is by the moral and cultural crisis, and the materialist crassness, of modern American society, which in the final pair of lines he describes as “a scandal”: “Here comes a scandal to blight you to bed. / ‘Here comes a cropper.’ That’s what I said.” Echoing the end of the traditional nursery-rhyme here—“Here comes a candle to light you to bed, / Here comes a chopper to chop off your head”—Berryman’s poem is an anti-exceptionalist broadside that interrogates the myth of American supremacy rather than celebrate it.

In an essay on Berryman’s achievement Douglas Dunn describes the “demands for political resistance” that have been made on the American writer:

The European psyche and intelligence have had radical socialisms and fascisms to hang on to, as well as usually more placid religious or nationalist orthodoxies and conservatisms. Positive demands for political resistance have also been made. Yet the American writer has been unable to face these options with quite the same confidence; or, rather, quite the same version of the lack of it. He has been forced to rely on himself, fearing, as did Berryman, “the increasingly fanatical Americans” but unwilling to enter that same arena on an opposing platform, except that of the self-as-art.¹³⁴

Dunn’s general assertion of the idea of a “European psyche and intelligence” that is essentially different from its American counterpart is contentious; more immediately problematic, however, is the description of Berryman’s “unwillingness” to enter the political “arena,” which is to undervalue the critical potential of his writing. As argued in the previous chapter, Berryman’s poetry does not declaim from the kind of “opposing platform” or in the manner that political writing is popularly thought to employ. Rather, Berryman’s critique of American culture and society is delivered by more subtle, usually associative means. As he puts it Dream Song 5 (the second stanza of which was used as an epigraph to *His Thought Made Pockets & the Plane Buckt* in 1958): “Careful Henry nothing said aloud”. Indeed, the critical project of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* is interestingly linked to *The Dream Songs* by the figure of “Mr Heartbreak, the New Man, /

come to farm a crazy land” in the third stanza of Dream Song 5, which clearly refers to the Colonial project. The Song’s closing image, “an image of the dead on the fingernail / of a newborn child”, embodies a sense of the inevitable disappointment that Berryman associated with the Colonial pursuit of a New World “Eden” in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. As Berryman puts it in “A Sympathy, A Welcome” (written after the birth of his first child in 1957): “Feel for your bad fall how could I fail, / poor Paul, who had it so good. / I can offer you only: this world like a knife.” (CP 157)

The “world like a knife” described in “A Sympathy, A Welcome” is the same “New World” that “welcomed” John Smith in 1607 in “Not to Live” (subtitled “*Jamestown 1957*”). In “Not to Live”—which takes its title from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*¹³⁵—Berryman writes: “It kissed us soft, to cut our throats, this coast”. (CP 157) “Not to Live” may be read as a footnote to *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, in its interrogation of the Colonial enterprise:

...I hunt,
 & hunt! but find here what to kill?— nothing is blunt,
 but phantoming uneases I find. Ghost
 on ghost precedes of all most scared us, most
 we fled. Howls fail upon this secret, far air: grunt,
 shaming for food; ...

(CP 157)

Berryman’s bleak appraisal of the historical settlement at Jamestown was repeated by the African-American poet Langston Hughes whose short poem “American Heartbreak” describes the failure of the American Dream in terms of “The great mistake / That Jamestown / Made long ago.”¹³⁶ Hughes rewrites the New World promise in terms of a “dream deferred” for African-Americans and other minority groups. Berryman’s refusal to celebrate the isolationist version of the American self signals his alignment with Hughes and the particular belief that, for many Americans, the American dream is “deferred” or translated into “a sourcing whom my lost candle like the firefly loves” as

Berryman puts it in the last line of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. (CP 147) Berryman's "colonial poem" clearly does not treat the question of race in anything more than a tangential manner, but its examination of the exceptionalist construction of American selfhood prepares the ground for the interrogation of authority that is central to any understanding of the ideological work accomplished in *The Dream Songs*.

Notes

¹ Ezra Pound, "L'Homme Moyen Sensuel," *Collected Shorter Poems* (1949; London: Faber and Faber, 1990) 238-46; 238.

² Berryman, "The American Intellectual and the American Dream," Unpublished Non-fiction Prose, Box 1, File 2, JBP. See Appendix 1.

³ Berryman, "The State of American Writing, 1948: Seven Questions," *Partisan Review* 8 (August 1948): 855-94; 855.

⁴ Berryman, unpublished letter to Robert Giroux, 18 May [1955], Published Poetry, Box 2 (*Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*), JBP.

⁵ Berryman, unpublished letter to Allen Tate, 1 November [1959], Published Prose, Box 5 (*The Arts of Reading*), JBP.

⁶ Berryman refers to *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* as "The Colonial poem" in an undated letter to his mother in May 1952, in *We Dream of Honour: John Berryman's Letters to His Mother*, ed. Richard J. Kelly (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1988) 242-43.

⁷ Berryman, 2 April 1948, in Kelly, *We Dream of Honour* 228.

⁸ John Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1980) 9.

⁹ Sharon Bryan, "Hearing Voices: John Berryman's Translation of Private Vision into Public Song," *Recovering Berryman: Essays on a Poet*, eds. Richard J. Kelly and Alan K. Lathrop (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993) 141-50; 147.

¹⁰ John Frederick Nims, "Screwing Up the Theorbo: Homage in Measure to Mr. Berryman," *Prairie Schooner* 32 (Spring 1958): 1-7. Reprinted in *Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman*, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988) 117-26; 126.

¹¹ Nims 126

¹² Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* 33.

¹³ Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* 33.

¹⁴ See Berryman, letter to his mother, 3 June 1953, in Kelly, *We Dream of Honour* 246.

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- ¹⁵ John Berryman, *Stephen Crane: A Critical Biography – Revised Edition* (1962; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) 79. The first edition of *Stephen Crane* was published by William Sloane Associates in 1950.
- ¹⁶ Berryman, *Stephen Crane* 323.
- ¹⁷ Berryman, *Stephen Crane* 78.
- ¹⁸ Berryman, *Stephen Crane* 79.
- ¹⁹ John Clendenning, “Rescue in Berryman’s *Crane*,” Kelly and Lathrop 179-87; 186.
- ²⁰ Berryman, *Stephen Crane* xii. Berryman’s emphasis.
- ²¹ Because descriptions of Berryman as a confessional poet tend to focus on *The Dream Songs* and his later poetry the idea of “narrow confessionalism” is developed in more detail in chapter 4, which examines his work from 1960-69.
- ²² Warner Berthoff, *A Literature Without Qualities: American Writing Since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) 34.
- ²³ Berthoff 34.
- ²⁴ Berthoff 5. Emphasis added.
- ²⁵ Berthoff 4-5. Emphasis added.
- ²⁶ Berryman, “From the Middle and Senior Generations,” *The American Scholar* 28 (Summer 1959): 384-90.
- ²⁷ Berthoff 4-5.
- ²⁸ Peter Makin, “Americanus Nazione non Moribus,” *Ezra Pound in America*, ed. Jacqueline Kaye (London: Macmillan, 1992) 55-78; 55.
- ²⁹ Berthoff 13.
- ³⁰ Berthoff 5.
- ³¹ Berthoff 14. Berthoff’s emphasis.
- ³² Berryman, “The American Intellectual and the American Dream.” Berryman’s emphasis.
- ³³ Berryman, “Africa: Some Notes on Modern Fiction” (Undated), Unpublished Non-fiction Prose, Box 1, File 1, JBP.
- ³⁴ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (1976; London: Faber and Faber, 1987) 439.
- ³⁵ Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* (1991; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992) 255.
- ³⁶ Ezra Pound, *Patria Mia* (1913; Chicago: Ralph Fletcher Seymour, 1950) 77.
- ³⁷ Ruland and Bradbury 255.
- ³⁸ Makin 55. Makin’s emphasis.
- ³⁹ Ezra Pound, *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (London: Faber and Faber, 1950) 123-25; 124.
- ⁴⁰ Pound, *Collected Shorter Poems* 88-89.
- ⁴¹ Pound, *Collected Shorter Poems* 89.

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- ⁴² Berryman, 1 December 1948, in Kelly, *We Dream of Honour* 230.
- ⁴³ Alan Holder, "Anne Bradstreet Resurrected," *Concerning Poetry* 2 (1969): 11-18; 11.
- ⁴⁴ Beverly Coyle and Alan Filreis, introduction, *Secretaries of the Moon: The Letters of Wallace Stevens & José Rodríguez Feo*, eds. Coyle and Filreis (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986) 1.
- ⁴⁵ Coyle and Filreis 146-47.
- ⁴⁶ Robert Lowell, "For John Berryman, 1914-1972," *Collected Prose* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987) 111-18; 113.
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- ⁴⁸ James Laughlin, unpublished letter to Berryman, 27 June 1947, Correspondence, Box 29, JBP.
- ⁴⁹ Laughlin, unpublished letter to Berryman, 18 August 1948, Correspondence, Box 29, JBP.
- ⁵⁰ Laughlin, unpublished letter to Berryman, 18 August 1948, Correspondence, Box 29, JBP.
- ⁵¹ Pound, unpublished letter to Berryman, undated, Correspondence, Box 29, JBP.
- ⁵² Charles Olson, unpublished letter to Berryman, 24 February 1947, Correspondence, Box 29, JBP.
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- ⁵⁴ Berryman, unpublished letter to Pound, undated, Correspondence, Box 29, JBP.
- ⁵⁵ Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Purification and Danger 1: American Poetry," *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980) 115-32; 119.
- ⁵⁶ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975) 186.
- ⁵⁷ Andrew Marvell, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (1972; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996) 109.
- ⁵⁸ Richard Kostelanetz, "Conversation with Berryman," *Massachusetts Review* 11.2 (Spring 1970): 340-47; 346.
- ⁵⁹ John Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* (1982; London: Ark Paperbacks, 1983) 215.
- ⁶⁰ Quoted in Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* 216.
- ⁶¹ Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* 217.
- ⁶² See Robert A. Corrigan, "Ezra Pound and the Bollingen Prize Controversy," *The Forties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama*, ed. Warren French (Deland, FL: Everett/Edwards, Inc., 1969) 287-95.
- ⁶³ Berryman, 26 October 1949, in Kelly, *We Dream of Honour* 232-33.
- ⁶⁴ Cited in Corrigan 289.
- ⁶⁵ Corrigan 289.
- ⁶⁶ Pound, *The Cantos* 439.
- ⁶⁷ Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) 362.
- ⁶⁸ Pound, *The Cantos* 439.
- ⁶⁹ Pound, *Patria Mia* 77.

⁷⁰ Cited in Corrigan 292.

⁷¹ For a fuller discussion of Pound's fascism and *The Pisan Cantos* see Michael North, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 128-86.

⁷² Berryman, 1 December 1948, in Kelly, *We Dream of Honour* 230.

⁷³ Berryman, 26 October 1949, in Kelly, *We Dream of Honour* 232.

⁷⁴ Berryman, *Stephen Crane* 58-9.

⁷⁵ Berryman, unpublished letter to Walter Stewart, [?] March 1947, Correspondence, Box 26, JBP.

⁷⁶ Berryman, *Stephen Crane* 273.

⁷⁷ Berryman, unpublished letter to Walter Stewart, [?] March 1947, Correspondence, Box 26, JBP.

⁷⁸ Berryman, unpublished letter to Walter Stewart, [?] March 1947, Correspondence, Box 26, JBP.

⁷⁹ Peter Stitt, "The Art of Poetry: An Interview with John Berryman," *Paris Review* 53 (Winter 1972): 177-207. Reprinted in Thomas, *Berryman's Understanding* 18-44; 24-5.

⁸⁰ Berryman, "Acceptance Speech for National Book Award" (New York: The National Book Committee, 1969).

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⁸² T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969) 171-76; 173.

⁸³ C. K. Stead, *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement* (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1986) 225.

⁸⁴ Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* 71.

⁸⁵ Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* 71.

⁸⁶ John-Paul Riquelme, *Harmony of Dissonances: T. S. Eliot, Romanticism, and Imagination* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) 200.

⁸⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989) 76.

⁸⁸ Hutcheon 81.

⁸⁹ Cited in Kelly, *We Dream of Honour* 245. See John Keats, letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon, 8 April 1818, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1935) 128-30.

⁹⁰ Udo Hebel, "Towards a Descriptive Poetics of *Allusion*," *Intertextuality*, ed. Heinrich F. Plett (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991) 135-64; 140-1.

⁹¹ Stead 357.

⁹² Joseph Mancini Jr., "John Berryman's Couvade Consciousness: An Approach to His Aesthetics," Kelly and Lathrop 169-78; 169.

⁹³ Mancini 169.

⁹⁴ Mancini 177.

⁹⁵ Mancini 177.

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- ⁹⁶ Gertrude Rachel Levy, *The Gate of Horn: A Study of the Religious Conceptions of the Stone Age, and their Influence upon European Thought* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948) 5.
- ⁹⁷ Levy xi.
- ⁹⁸ Levy 5.
- ⁹⁹ Henri Frankfort, introduction, G. R. Levy, *Religious Conceptions of the Stone Age; and their Influence upon European Thought* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1963) v.
- ¹⁰⁰ Frankfort v.
- ¹⁰¹ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) 157.
- ¹⁰² Cited in Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent* 63.
- ¹⁰³ Described by A. A. Luce as George Berkeley's "only known serious poem," the final stanza of "Verses by the Author, on the prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America" begins with the line "Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way". See George Berkeley, *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, eds. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, vol. 7 (1955; Nendeln: Nelson, 1979) 367-73; 373.
- ¹⁰⁴ Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent* 156-57.
- ¹⁰⁵ Giroux, unpublished letter to Berryman, 21 April 1955, Published Poetry, Box 2 (*Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*), JBP.
- ¹⁰⁶ Cited in Berryman, letter to his mother, 11 October 1956, in Kelly, *We Dream of Honour* 298.
- ¹⁰⁷ Kelly, *We Dream of Honour* 298.
- ¹⁰⁸ Some of Ben Shahn's drawings for *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* are included in Appendix 2.
- ¹⁰⁹ Stanley Kunitz, "No Middle Flight: Berryman's *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*," *Poetry* 90 (July 1957): 244-49. Reprinted in Thomas, *Berryman's Understanding* 110-16; 116.
- ¹¹⁰ Three of the ten illustrations that Shahn provided for the 1956 Farrar, Straus and Cudahy edition of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* are reproduced in Appendix 2.
- ¹¹¹ Bernarda Bryson Shahn, unpublished letter to Berryman, undated, Published Poetry, Box 2 (*Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*), JBP.
- ¹¹² Bernarda Bryson Shahn, unpublished letter to Berryman, undated, Published Poetry, Box 2 (*Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*), JBP.
- ¹¹³ Details concerning Shahn's life, work, and politics are drawn from Frances K. Pohl, *Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947-1954* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), and Frances K. Pohl, *Ben Shahn* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1993).
- ¹¹⁴ Anonymous, "Ben Shahn: Painter of Protest Turns to Reflection," *Life* 4 Oct. 1954: 96-100. Cited in Pohl, *Ben Shahn* 23.
- ¹¹⁵ Michael Kimmelman, "Trying to Separate Ben Shahn's Art From His Politics," *New York Times* 13 Nov. 1998, 33-7.
- ¹¹⁶ Paul Klee, *On Modern Art*, trans. Herbert Read (1948; London: Faber and Faber: 1974) 1.

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- ¹¹⁷ Read in Klee 6.
- ¹¹⁸ Conrad Aiken, quoted on the cover of the first Farrar, Straus and Cudahy edition of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in 1956.
- ¹¹⁹ Kunitz 112.
- ¹²⁰ Berryman, "Acceptance Speech for National Book Award."
- ¹²¹ Kunitz 110.
- ¹²² See Appendix 2.
- ¹²³ Anne Bradstreet, "Upon the Burning of Our House, July 10th, 1666," *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, ed. Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1967) 292-93; 292.
- ¹²⁴ Robert Lowell, *Robert Lowell's Poems—A Selection*, ed. Jonathan Raban (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1974) 48-50.
- ¹²⁵ Raban in Lowell, *Robert Lowell's Poems* 165.
- ¹²⁶ Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent* 157.
- ¹²⁷ Marvell 109.
- ¹²⁸ Stitt 24.
- ¹²⁹ Martin Corner, "Moving Outwards: Consciousness, Discourse and Attention in Saul Bellow's Fiction," *Studies in the Novel* 32.3 (Fall 2000): 368-85; 383.
- ¹³⁰ Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996) 402.
- ¹³¹ Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* 238.
- ¹³² Allen Ginsberg, *Selected Poems 1947-1995* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1997) 49-56; 53.
- ¹³³ Paul Mariani, *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman* 2nd ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996) 323.
- ¹³⁴ Douglas Dunn, "Gaiety & Lamentation: The Defeat of John Berryman," *Encounter* 43 (August 1974): 72-77. Reprinted in Thomas, *Berryman's Understanding* 139-51; 144.
- ¹³⁵ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, IV.iii.104. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, eds. *The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1998) 975-99; 994.
- ¹³⁶ Langston Hughes, "American Heartbreak," *Selected Poems* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999) 9.

CHAPTER 4

DENYING THE GODS OF THE GARDEN:

FIGURING AUTHORITY IN *THE DREAM SONGS* AND “FORMAL ELEGY,” 1960-69

Detached, involved, H[enry] sang.

(John Berryman)¹

But man, proud man,
Dressed in a little brief authority...

(William Shakespeare)²

Through his presentation of a series of dystopian revisions or “nightmares of Eden” in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, Berryman challenges the authority of the exceptionalist version of the American experience by describing the terminal disappointment that underscored Anne Bradstreet’s life in the New World. In his telling of it, Bradstreet never felt entirely at home in America: she is described as “Ruth / away” (CP 135), experiencing the same feelings of dispossession and displacement that marked Berryman’s experience of American society three hundred years later. It is therefore crucial to the continuity of Berryman’s critical project that in the first Dream Song Henry is described as “wicked & away.” (DS 1) Being “wicked” Henry is similar to the Puritan schismatic Anne Hutchinson, the “Bitter sister, victim!” of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* who was exiled from society for her non-conformist beliefs. (CP 139) Berryman’s description of Henry “away” embodies the Yeatsian idea of displaced subjectivity where the individual may be present to his/her community in physical form but is in fact alienated from it. Henry is frequently described in terms of being or going “away” in *The Dream Songs*: “—I cannot remember. I am going away” (DS 25); “—Come away, Mr Bones / [...] / ancient fires for eyes, his head full / & his heart full, he’s making ready to move on.” (DS 77); “O love, / what was you loafing of / that fifty put you off, out &

away,” (DS 104); “she flings to her head a leg, bobs, all is well, / she dances Henry away.” (DS 382) Contrary to the claim that “all is well” in the penultimate line of Dream Song 382, however, the reader’s general and indeed abiding sense of the world described in *The Dream Songs* as a whole is one of frustration and discord. As Berryman writes in the opening lines of Dream Song 149: “This world is gradually becoming a place / where I do not care to be any more.”

Typified by Al Alvarez’s description of Berryman’s turn “from the public, literary world of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* to the still stylized but far more intimate cycle of [The] *Dream Songs*”³, many critics of Berryman’s work from this period have tended to advocate the view that it is characterised by avoidance rather than engagement. The recurring motif of departure in *The Dream Songs* supports this claim in some respects, but Henry’s persistent desire to be elsewhere signifies a more problematic relation to the American ground of his social and cultural experience that allows Berryman’s most important long poem to be read as an extended meditation on the vicissitudes of Cold War displacement and alienation. What may be described as the narrow confessional interpretation of *The Dream Songs*—because it undervalues the possibilities presented by the poem as an instrument of cultural or political critique—has predominated Berryman criticism. With both generosity and hostility, analyses of Berryman’s work by critics as different in their overall approach as Alvarez, Toynebee, Williamson, and Perloff, have presented *The Dream Songs* as a poem that is best described in terms of autobiographical solipsism, with particular emphasis on what it reveals about Berryman’s private self. This chapter reassesses the narrow confessional designation of Berryman’s work, and explores the range of his engagements with the public sphere in *The Dream Songs*. Focusing on the poem’s exploration of various forms of authority, Berryman emerges here as a poet for whom the difficult relationship between self and world—contrary to the views of his most fervent detractors—is seldom avoided.

1. "All projects failed": Reconsidering Henry's Fate

(i)

There can be no doubt but that a large section of Berryman's output may be described as autobiographical in that it often appears to describe the personal details of the poet's life. Autobiography is surely more complicated than that, however, and critics often proceed as if Berryman's work is nothing more than "autobiography-in-verse" as he writes in the late poem "Message." (CP 200-1) Louise Glück has suggested that:

We incline, in our anxiety for formulas, to be literal: we scan Frost's face compulsively for hidden kindness, having found the poems to be, by all reports, so much better than the man. This assumes our poems are our fingerprints, which they are not.⁴

Berryman expresses a similar point in *The Dream Songs* where he writes, "I am a *half-closed* book." (DS 159; emphasis added) Many readers of *The Dream Songs* have assumed that the poem tells all there is to know about Berryman's life. As Glück suggests with regard to *Love & Fame*, however, the "single speaker" of Berryman's work might be better considered as a "commentator."⁵ So while many individual Dream Songs present as a commentary on Berryman's life, others intervene in debates and discussions of more universal cultural, social, or political import. Contrary to or at least coextensive with Alvarez's belief that *The Dream Songs* enacts a radical turn inward, beginning "as a quirky poetic journal of misdemeanours, gripes, hangovers and morning-after despair, then gradually clarified and deepened into an extended act of poetic mourning for the suicide of a father, the premature deaths of friends and his own suicidal despair"⁶, Berryman's engagement with a range of less subjectively introspective and more worldly questions also needs to be considered.

Asked for his reaction to being described as a confessional poet in an interview with Peter Stitt in July 1970, Berryman replied: "With rage and contempt! Next question."⁷ Berryman's response indicates the extent to which the term "confessional"

had, by the early 1970s, become a byword for a form of debased poetic expression principally concerned with exposing the author's private life. Elizabeth Bishop made much the same point in a letter to Robert Lowell in 1972 before the publication of his controversial collection *The Dolphin* (1973).⁸ Bishop criticised Lowell for using his wife's letters in the poems of *The Dolphin* but more generally her letter addresses the way in which, since the publication of *Life Studies* in 1959 and M. L. Rosenthal's description of Lowell's work as "confessional," the term had come to signify a kind of uncontrolled poetic exhibitionism:

In general, I deplore the "confessional"—however, when you wrote *Life Studies* perhaps it was a necessary movement, and it helped make poetry more real, fresh and immediate. But now—ye gods—anything goes, and I am so sick of poems about the students' mothers & fathers and sex lives and so on. All that can be done—but at the same time one surely should have a feeling that one can trust the writer—not to distort, tell lies, etc.⁹

Bishop's letter describes a general impatience with the narrowing down of the idea of confessional poetry from the way it had been applied to *Life Studies* over a decade earlier. Although it is certainly the case that both Berryman and Lowell often wrote in candid terms about their "mothers & fathers and sex lives and so on", Bishop's exasperation relates to the fact that many contemporary commentators (and practitioners) of poetry had come to view the "confessional" as a mode of introspective literary auto-therapy that had little or no sense of responsibility to the world and functioned in the first instance as a record of the author's personal anxieties.

In his 1959 review of *Life Studies* Rosenthal wrote that "The use of poetry for the most naked kind of confession grows apace in our day."¹⁰ Rosenthal suggested that it was difficult "not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences," but he also argued that the book brought "past and present, and all political and psychological realities, into one single focus of defeat."¹¹ In the decade following the publication of his review, however, Rosenthal's description of Lowell's poetry as an "inescapably

encompassing art”¹²—in its ability to include a vision of psychological *and* political realities—was significantly revised so that the second half of the dialectic became the main focus of members (poets and critics) of the so-called “confessional school.” Rosenthal later suggested that the “confessional school” had “done a certain amount of damage.”¹³ That “damage” may be discerned in Berryman studies in the way that most commentators consider his work much in the manner suggested by the example of Alvarez and others who, as one observer has put it, “seem to like their American poets to be suicidal, mentally ill, and a touch unruly”¹⁴.

Gregory Orr has written that “When the confessional poets transformed and extended American poetry by courageously engaging an enormous amount of autobiographical material, it had the effect of ensnaring the self in the conditional, circumstantial world.”¹⁵ In Bishop’s reading of *The Dolphin*, the “conditional, circumstantial world” is that of Lowell’s domestic life with Elizabeth Hardwick. Bishop feared that *The Dolphin* would be interpreted by Lowell’s detractors as mere self-indulgence: “the poem—parts of it—”, she wrote, “may well be taken up and used against you by all the wrong people—who are waiting in the wings to attack you.”¹⁶ By 1972, Bishop’s fears for the reception of Lowell’s poetry were already well established where the critical appraisal of Berryman’s work was concerned. Berryman’s dismissal of the confessional label in his 1970 interview with Stitt, indeed, may be considered in terms of his frustration with the general reception that greeted *The Dream Songs*. Several of the poems edited by John Haffenden and published in 1977 as *Henry’s Fate & Other Poems, 1967-1972* describe Berryman’s disappointment with the way the poem was being received. “Henry’s Fate,” for example, which was written in August 1968 (a few months before the publication of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*) begins: “All projects failed, in the August afternoon / he lay & cursed himself & cursed his lot / like Housman’s lad forsooth.” (HF 32) Berryman, who once described Housman as one of his “heroes,”¹⁷

may have been alluding to the final section (LXIII) of *A Shropshire Lad* here, where

“Housman’s lad” says:

I hoed and trenched and weeded,
 And took the flowers to fair:
I brought them home unheeded;
 The hue was not the wear.

So up and down I sow them
 For lads like me to find,
When I shall lie below them,
 A dead man out of mind...¹⁸

In “Henry’s Fate,” Berryman considers the fruits (or “flowers”) of his own efforts, and concludes that they have come to nothing: “In official rime / the official verdict was: dead.” (HF 32)

Although Berryman’s long poem had in its various stages of publication won many prestigious awards—the Russell Loines Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1964 and a Pulitzer Prize in 1965 for *77 Dream Songs*, and a National Book Award and the Bollingen Prize in 1969 for *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*—it was also the subject of considerable critical ridicule. Reviewing *77 Dream Songs* in March 1965, for example, Philip Toynbee acknowledged Berryman’s prominence in American poetry but he also wrote that “he is a poet whose evaporation rate is very high indeed.”¹⁹ Described by William Wasserstrom as “Negative opinion at its harshest,”²⁰ Toynbee argued that *77 Dream Songs* was little more than an exercise in sensationalism where “Generalizations [...] leap out of the exotic turmoil from time to time with a rather sickening thud.”²¹ As far as Toynbee was concerned *77 Dream Songs* “wrapped up an untranscended poverty of thought and feeling in a form which may excite but cannot feed his readers.”²² Toynbee’s criticism may be interpreted in terms of the general view that the poem fails to engage with the world beyond the immediately personal experiences of its author.

In some respects Berryman provoked this view of *The Dream Songs*. When asked what he saw as “the present relationship between politics and poetry” in terms of his

own writing in an interview on the day after the publication of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* in 1968 he said:

Oh, I don't think I can answer that question, but I'll try. Robert Bly makes a living out of the [Vietnam] war, and I'm against this. He uses my name in different cities; and he finally rang me up once and asked me to read in a given city at a given time, and I told him to go fuck himself. And he said, "Do you mean you're not willing to read against the war?" And I said, "No." And he said, "Well, I'm appalled." And I said, "Well, be appalled!" and hung up. I'm completely against the war—I hate everything about it. But I don't believe in works of art being used as examples. I would like to write political poems, but aside from "Formal Elegy," I've never been moved to do so...²³

Two years later Bly reviewed *The Dream Songs* for the *Minneapolis Tribune*.²⁴ His review initiated a bitter public dispute about Berryman's stance in relation to the Vietnam War, and the subsequent correspondence to the newspaper contested Bly's description of the poem as an agglomeration of "cultural junk that accumulates in the attics of humanities professors." One correspondent complained to the editor of the newspaper that "To allow a personal vendetta to be carried out on the pages of your Book Review section is a disservice to the usually high-calibre reviews on those pages."²⁵ Keith Gunderson, a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Minnesota, explained the matter in terms of Bly's "intolerance for someone who has lived a life different from his by teaching humanities for 30 years."²⁶ Bly's view that the author of *The Dream Songs* "respects the American cultural hierarchy very much" has been reinforced by readings that represent Berryman's work in narrow confessional terms, focusing attention on its ostensibly autobiographical aspects and denying that its value can be described in terms of political or social critique.

Diane Wood Middlebrook has suggested that "Confessional poetry was not overtly political, but it participated in the protest against Impersonality as a poetic value by reinstating an insistently autobiographical first person engaged in the resistance to conform."²⁷ With regard to Berryman, however, commentators have been reluctant to recognise even the most "overtly political" aspects of his work: by concentrating on what

are perceived to be the introspective “autobiographical” aspects of *The Dream Songs*, Berryman’s general profile is that of a disengaged “Humanities professor” as Bly put it in his 1970 review. Bly refused to take seriously even the more obvious—let alone overt—political sections of *The Dream Songs*, such as Dream Song 23 (“The Lay of Ike”), or Dream Song 217, which examines the theme of memory in relation to American history. Given Bly’s activism in relation to the Vietnam War it is surprising that he did not consider Dream Song 162 (“Vietnam”), which describes the poet’s horror at the continuing war and his revulsion of its daily treatment in the media:

Henry shuddered: a war which was no war,
the enemy was not our enemy
but theirs whoever they are
and the treaty-end that might conclude it more
unimaginable than *Alice’s* third volume-eee—
and somehow our policy bare

in eighteen costumes kept us unaware
that we were killing Asiatics, daily,
with the disgusting numbers given
on my front page, at which, my love, I stare.

By ignoring Dream Songs such as these, Bly contributed to the critical diminishment of the world described by Berryman’s poem at the time of its publication. Moreover, Berryman’s examination of authority in the poem as a whole, which includes an interrogation of the “cultural hierarchy” with which Bly claims Berryman is aligned, is entirely overlooked in his analysis.

In “One Answer to a Question: Changes,” Berryman suggests that the composition of a “long poem” should involve “the construction of a world rather than the reliance upon one already existent which is available to a small poem.” (FP 330) In *The Dream Songs* his mapping of the self often involves an intimate and painful examination of the world of his own memories and experiences, what he calls the “the geography of grief” in Dream Song 172. Berryman also engages the external world of 1950s and 1960s America in the poem, however, and a large number of Dream Songs

can be read as meditations on the Cold War period and, in important cases, commentaries on the cultural politics of the “New Frontier.” In the posthumously published *Dream Song* beginning “He sits in the dawn, if it can be called dawn” (*HF* 43), written in the winter of 1969-70, Berryman reflects on the failure of his poem to “feed his readers”²⁸, and that “the brilliances whereof he dreamed / in swift youth” remain hidden after the long labour and final publication a few months earlier of what was to have been his *magnum opus*. Writing of “failed Henry” Berryman reiterates the opening judgement of the earlier “Henry’s Fate” and considers the fact that the final value of his poem—Henry’s “use” as he puts it in another posthumously published *Dream Song* (*HF* 10)—has yet to be discovered:

Where hide the brilliances whereof he dreamed
in swift youth, loud, unable to recite
the actual history of disappointment
that would be his, and that would be all right.
Two of his books are being put into German,
one was earlier in Polish.

So here failed Henry sits, counting his losses,
not wholly in despair, and growing hungry.
He slept longer than usual:
one cliff he had to descend, clinging to mosses,
woke him though. I would call him half-angry,
an object of wintry pity.

Many of the poems in *Henry’s Fate* support Helen Vendler’s claim that “the *Dream Songs* remain their own severest critics,”²⁹ but they also suggest that Berryman felt the readers of his long poem had failed to see his point in writing it. After the publication of *The Dream Songs* in 1969, when Henry’s “construction” was supposedly complete, it remained the case that “question tormented the multitude one by one / to see to what use it would now be put.” (*HF* 10) In many of the *Dream Songs* collected posthumously in *Henry’s Fate* Berryman expresses a strong sense of disillusionment with the fact that readers of *The Dream Songs* refused to see it as anything more than an example of the kind of narrow confessionalism deplored by Bishop, a sensational exposition of his personal life.

(ii)

Berryman was obsessed with failure, but its pervasiveness as a theme in *The Dream Songs* can be considered as a function of something greater than personal disappointment. In her study of American exceptionalism, Deborah Madsen examines some of the ways that Thomas Pynchon “uses the mythology of American exceptionalism to offer a critique of American culture”³⁰ in his novels. In her analysis of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, which was first published in 1966, Madsen describes how towards the end of the novel:

Oedipa wanders down a railroad track and, in the dark, becomes disoriented: she cannot find the mountains, cannot find the sea. What she does find is a sense of the limitlessness of the land on which she stands, in the absence of the divisions that are imposed by society. And she asks how it could all have happened that in the New World, in a land of infinite possibility, all should be reduced to binary choices: elect or preterite, citizen or exile.³¹

In *The Dream Songs* Berryman also acknowledges this reduction of “infinite possibility” to “binary choices” as a failure of New World promise, most notably in the closing lines of Dream Song 385 where he longs for “a middle ground between things and the soul”. Henry’s yearning for this “middle ground” in Dream Song 385 may be compared to Oedipa Maas’s description of the necessity for “a separate, silent, unsuspected world” in *The Crying of Lot 49*.³² Indeed, Pynchon’s portrayal of “God [knows] how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by US Mail” as “a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery”³³ is pertinent to an analysis of Henry’s frequent withdrawals from mainstream society in *The Dream Songs*, the importance of which is marked in the poem’s opening line: “Huffy Henry hid the day”.

Begun in 1955, when Eisenhower was president, and continued through the Kennedy years and well into the 1960s, *The Dream Songs* frequently reflects the precariousness of that difficult period in American history and politics. Writing about the career of Berryman’s contemporary Charles Olson, Paul Breslin has suggested that he (Olson) “began [...] by reacting against American poetry and culture in the years of

Truman and Eisenhower.”³⁴ Breslin quite rightly draws a sharp distinction between Olson and Berryman in terms of their radically divergent ideas about poetic form. Like many commentators, however, Breslin suggests that Berryman’s work is that of a “confessional autobiographer”, to which Olson’s work offers a “refreshing corrective”.³⁵ Breslin negotiates the political possibilities of Olson’s poetry in terms of the way that his “projective” poetics influenced the more overtly political poetry of Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan in a gesture of critical goodwill that is rarely afforded to Berryman. Unlike Olson’s Maximus, Berryman’s Henry is a character riven by uncertainty and doubt. Not even his surname is certain, as he appears variously in *The Dream Songs* as, for example, “Henry House” (*DS* 12), “Henry Pussy-cat” (*DS* 22), and “Henry Hankovitch” (*DS* 31). Olson’s Maximus, on the other hand, is an assertive figure, confidently declaring in the opening section of *The Maximus Poems* (“I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You”):

Off-shore, by islands hidden in the blood
jewels & miracles, I, Maximus
a metal hot from boiling water, tell you
what is a lance, who obeys the figures of
the present dance³⁶

These lines from the beginning of Olson’s long work are markedly different in tone to the opening of *The Dream Songs*, where Henry’s survival is a matter of amazement: “I don’t see how Henry, pried / open for all the world to see, survived.” (*DS* 1)

Comparing the long works of Berryman and Olson a pair of divergent attitudes towards contemporary American society, history, and culture may be discerned. Breslin has written that Olson “lived through the turbulence of the late 1960s and welcomed the counterculture as a sign of an emerging new consciousness,”³⁷ but Berryman refused to entertain any idea of a postmodern renaissance in American culture. His experience of the paranoid 1950s left him with a permanent feeling of distrust for any revised forms of cultural and/or political authority in the United States, as the first two lines of *Dream*

Song 12 (“Sabbath”), which was written in 1957, suggest: “There is an eye, there was a slit. / Nights walk, and confer on him fear.” The “Sabbath belling” as “Snoods converge / on a weary-daring man” in the third stanza of this Dream Song describes Henry’s sense of impending entrapment, but the “belling” here echoes the inquisitorial activities of “the synod of Cambridge” in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* also, where John Cotton and others “rake” to decide the fate of the reactionary Anne Hutchinson. (CP 138) There, Berryman writes that, “Factioning passion blinds // all to all her good, all – can she be exiled?” (CP 138-9) In Henry’s case, however, exile is self-imposed. Henry is an American inner émigré, “with far to go; / far to go, pal” as Berryman puts it in Dream Song 109.

Unlike Henry in *The Dream Songs*, Olson’s Maximus is imperious from the outset of *The Maximus Poems*. The physical strength and assertiveness that Olson grants the figure of Maximus is significant because it reveals an important distinction between Berryman’s understanding of identity as something uncertain and precarious and what Robert Creeley has described as Olson’s attempt to “regain authority for the innate coherence of whatever it is that we propose as life.”³⁸ The kind of “authority” that Olson was trying to “regain” is evident in what Peter Middleton has described as the “totalizing mania” of *The Maximus Poems*,³⁹ but it may be explained also in terms of Olson’s rigorously isolationist cultural politics. In a letter to the *New Mexico Quarterly* in May 1954, in response to a review by Grover Smith of recent collections of poems by William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane, Olson wrote:

This man, Grover Smith, “On Poets And Poetry,” in your 1953 Autumn issue. He’s a glib one. But because he is a *philosophe* (and not another of the textualists) I take it he ought to be met on the premises of the systematic by which he there judges, out of hand, the work of Hart Crane and W. C. Williams. Nor is it surprising that he also, in his easy article, is more at home, patently with Yeats, and, by way of Durrell’s book, with Hopkins, and Eliot. For I think it can be shown that his strictures on Crane as disordered, and on Williams as equally random, are more of the cultural colonialism (not to be bothered with Smith’s academicism) which keeps readers from the advance in discourse which Pound &

Williams, and Crane, after his lights, led the rest of us on to. [...] Thus—and slyly—he depresses the whole of the American push to find out an alternative discourse to the inherited one, to the one implicit in the language from Chaucer to Browning, to try, by some other means than “pattern” and the “rational,” to cause discourse to cover—as it only ever best can—the real.⁴⁰

The “textualists” referred to by Olson are, of course, the New Critics, but his quarrel has less to do with the agrarian conservatism of Ransom and Tate than it has with the idea that the “open” forms of Pound and Williams represent a specifically “American push to find out an alternative discourse to the inherited one.” Olson, in other words, perceived an important connection between the poetry of Williams and Pound and their cultural politics, and he considered their experiments in form in terms of their rejection of the “inherited” discourse of a modern European poetry with Yeats as its most significant English-language representative.

Yeats was rejected by Olson because of what he saw as the Anglo-Irish poet’s Old World attitude to “the sentence,” which he believed had dominated poetic discourse “from Sophocles to Hardy.”⁴¹ The alternative discourse proposed by Olson, however, is bound up with a political desire to separate American poetry from its European heritage, which is summed up by the title of his short poem, “The Death of Europe.”⁴² Berryman’s Henry, with his radically unstable identity and “his plights & gripes / as bad as achilles [sic],” (*DS* 14) opposes the imperial assertiveness of Olson’s Maximus who, at one point in *The Maximus Poems*, is “reminded” of:

the nights I crossed
the Harbor etc I cld wrap myself in the tide it is so flat
& at her threads
and sleep
as Homer did that last night on Smyrna’s
edge hard on the road-side ruts from
having spent too long watching
& eating too little and go as though this Fort were
a sea-fort
easily⁴³

The “ease” with which Maximus swims across the harbour may be read as a metaphor for the strength and authority of a revitalised culture that Olson believed would herald “the initiation / of another kind of nation.”⁴⁴

Olson’s vision of “another kind of nation” was grounded in his ultimate rejection of European culture. As he puts it in “The Kingfishers”: “I am no Greek, hath not th’advantage. / And, of course, no Roman”.⁴⁵ In *The Dream Songs*, however, Berryman reasserts the transatlantic bond between America and Europe, and the fact that a large part of the poem was written in and about Europe signifies a positive attitude towards exchange with the Old World distinctly different to that expressed in Olson’s work. Henry’s persistent desire to be elsewhere, and to be away from the United States, registers Berryman’s sense of disillusionment with Cold War American culture and society but critics have overwhelmingly preferred to read *The Dream Songs* as a journal of emotional rather than socio-cultural or political displacement. The failure of *The Dream Songs* to generate critical readings that take account of its ideological interventions has less to do with the poem itself, however, than with the political motivations or hesitations of its critics. Why does Joel Conarroe, for example, insist that “Berryman’s subject is Henry House, not the White House”⁴⁶, when on numerous occasions in *The Dream Songs* it is clear that Berryman is concerned with interrogating the nature of American authority? Conarroe is one of those critics for whom, as Cary Nelson has suggested, the expositions of an imperfect American cultural and/or political situation in Berryman’s work “need to be contained within autobiographical confession.”⁴⁷ A great deal of commentary on *The Dream Songs* has been restricted or “contained” in this manner.

2. “The original fault”:

Confessional Containment and American Exceptionalism

(i)

Berryman deliberately antagonised the political activist Bly when, during a period of great tension in American history, he said that “I would like to write political poems, but aside from ‘Formal Elegy’ I have never been moved to do so”.⁴⁸ Berryman was setting himself up to be criticised later on as a solipsistic aesthete, as Perloff does in her influential essay “*Poètes Maudits* of the Genteel Tradition: Lowell and Berryman.”⁴⁹ Perloff repeats Bly’s anti-academic bias by arguing that “Culture for [Berryman and Lowell] belonged safely at home—in Boston or New York or on the Campus where one studied and taught and compared notes with one’s friends.”⁵⁰ Accusing both Lowell and Berryman of intentional cultural solipsism, she pays no attention to such important details as Berryman’s collaboration with Ben Shahn in the 1950s, for example, and her argument ignores Steven Gould Axelrod’s point (made in relation to Lowell) that among the “essentials of Confessional poetry” is “a dialectic of private matter with public matter”.⁵¹ The analyses of critics and commentators such as Perloff and Bly have contributed to the predominance of the narrow confessional view of Berryman, Lowell, and others, where descriptions of the “private” details of the self are considered unruly “literary offenses” that forgo the consideration of their work’s “public” or political engagements.

In a polemical introduction (subtitled “Beyond the Gentility Principle”) to the influential anthology *The New Poetry*, first published in 1962, Alvarez argued that achievement in the “new” poetry depended upon “the degree to which the poets [could] remain immune to the disease so often found in English culture: gentility.”⁵² In making this claim, Alvarez acknowledged the cardinal interest in behavioural and psychological disorder by critical proponents of narrow confessionalism, but he was also suggesting that a distinct difference existed between English and American modes of poetic

expression in the 1960s. While there is nothing inherently unusual about this claim, given that different schools and movements have always existed and coexisted on either side of the Atlantic, Alvarez was in fact doing more in his essay than merely stating the obvious. In his claim that “During the Forties [...] when English poetry was at its nadir, there arose in the States a new generation of poets, the most important of whom were Robert Lowell and John Berryman”⁵³, Alvarez helps to construct a sense of American poetry as an exotic alternative to the local product. The significance of Alvarez’s treatment of American poetry in exceptional terms may be measured in terms of the influence his work as an editor and anthologist has had on the general perception of Lowell, Berryman, and others, who are viewed as different not just because they are American, but more centrally because they appear to treat issues in their work which British writers until quite recently felt too inhibited to tackle. Alvarez’s discovery of “the New Poetry” was bound up with his discovery of the New World.

Thomas Travisano offers a good account of the development of the confessional paradigm in his study *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic* (1999). Although he makes a number of important points regarding the limitations of the model, however, he fails to consider the idea that the confessional paradigm has served as a way of containing these poets’ criticisms of American society and culture by focusing attention on the apparently indomitable autobiographical inwardness of their work. Raising a number of major criticisms of the confessional school—such as its refusal to acknowledge the “significantly fictive” aspects of the works of these poets, and its tendency to treat “the technical, epistemological, and moral complexities” of their work reductively⁵⁴—Travisano does not go far enough in his description of actual engagements with American culture and authority in the poetry of Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, and Berryman. Responding to Rosenthal’s belief that “the conception of a confessional school has [...] done a certain amount of damage”,

Travisano is correct when he writes that “One measure of the damage done so far is that ‘the conception of a confessional school’ has done much to obscure the career-long conversation about poetry and poetics that engaged Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, and Elizabeth Bishop.”⁵⁵ He might have added, however, that their “career-long conversation” was not solely literary, and that it often included an analysis of the cultural / political climate of their time.

Travisano does not mention Alvarez in his study, but he is finally concerned to redeem the four poets of his “midcentury quartet” as a distinctly *American* group, in much the same way that Alvarez is keen to impress upon his readers a sense of his discovery of Berryman and Lowell’s cultural newfangledness. Discussing the “emphasis on movement and change” in *The Dream Songs* Travisano writes:

Berryman’s *Dream Songs* is perhaps the most house-bound epic ever written. Its basic setting is the poet, sitting in his study or lying in his bed, musing and dreaming. Yet the Songs are far from static. Each embodies in a mere eighteen lines, a process of often giddy psychological movement that carries the reader across multiple planes of experience. [...] The emphasis on movement and change often rises to an explicitly thematic level in the poems, relating movement to risk, discovery, or moral inquiry. Hence, at the end of 77 *Dream Songs* one encounters Henry, learning that with “his head full / & his heart full, he’s making ready to move on” (*DS* 77). Where Henry is moving on *to* is unknown, but then, motion may be the only constant in a poem too peripatetic for consistent disclosures.⁵⁶

Where Henry moves “*to*” at the end of 77 *Dream Songs*, however, is not so significant as the question where (or what) does he flee *from*? That question is answered in the second stanza of Dream Song 77:

—Henry is tired of the winter,
& haircuts, & a squeamish comfy ruin-prone proud national
mind, & Spring (in the city so called).
Hé would be prepared to live in a world of Fáll
forever, impenitent Henry.
But the snows and summers grieve & dream;

Referring on one level to the protracted nature of Minnesotan winters in this stanza, Berryman also signals a rejection of mainstream American cultural authority that echoes

the opening lines of Allen Ginsberg's "Paterson": "What do I want in these rooms papered with visions of money? / How much can I make by cutting my hair?"⁵⁷ Berryman's desire to move away from "a squeamish comfy ruin-prone proud national mind"—America at the height of the Kennedy era—is surely significant in itself but Travisano, like those advocates of the confessional school from whom he wishes to distance himself, ignores this part of the question.

Although they have very different agendas and represent different generations of critical thought, both Alvarez and Travisano partake in the confessional school's general refusal to consider the challenge to American cultural and political authority signalled by the peripatetic movements of Berryman's Henry. For Alvarez, Berryman's Americanness is an important part of his appeal. In his argument against the confessional school's stubborn concentration on the psychological territory of his work, Travisano fails to appreciate Berryman's estrangement from American society as a significant aspect of his poetry's critical engagement with the world. All too often in his account Travisano falls back into the language of narrow confessionalism and the confessional school's interest in psychological extremism. He may rightly suggest that "the most compelling emotional issues of the *Dream Songs* are never confessed but exist only as subtext" but he counteracts that movement away from the confessional paradigm by writing that "The poem is much more effectively read for the ways it explores and represents the disturbing, symptomatic consequences of suppressed rage and repressed emotion."⁵⁸ Both approaches describe an overarching interest in the kind of psychological extremism that Alvarez discerned as the defining characteristic of Berryman's writing.

Writing in 1974, J. M. Linebarger dismissed Berryman's political stance as that of a "white, middle-class, liberal intellectual" and he argued that *The Dream Songs*, *Berryman's Sonnets*, and *Love & Fame* may be viewed as separate "instalment[s] of the poet's autobiography in verse."⁵⁹ In a study of Berryman's work published in 1978, Gary Q.

Arpin came closer to the point being pursued here when he argued that “The political songs in *The Dream Songs* serve much the same purpose as the political poems in *The Dispossessed*: they place the poet in the darkened world-city, and help to emphasize the fact that the problems Henry bears are not just personal, but are the problems of the culture.”⁶⁰ Taking Arpin’s claim a step further, it may be seen that Henry’s problems are not only “the problems of the culture” but they are in some sense caused by it. This is registered in the first Dream Song’s description of Henry’s “departure” from a world that has been corrupted or uncomfortably altered:

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.

(DS 1)

The issue of Henry’s survival is a major theme in *The Dream Songs*. It is introduced in the first Dream Song (“I don’t see how Henry, pried / open for all the world to see, survived”) and remains prominent throughout the poem. In Dream Song 26, for example, at the end of Book I, Henry announces that he has “died”: “I had a most marvellous piece of luck. I died.” At the start of Book II, however, it transpires that Henry has in fact survived and that his “death” has resulted in him being transported to another place where “The greens of the Ganges delta foliate.” (DS 27) Providing yet another example of Henry in a state of being away, a reference in the same Dream Song to Henry’s “migrant heart” provides a key to a fuller understanding of the way that *The Dream Songs* “dramatize the vicissitudes of the sense of identity”, as Haffenden has suggested. (HF xv) Haffenden’s point relates to Henry’s radical cultural ventriloquism, his ability to speak for multiple selves, which is described in Dream Song 22 (“Of 1826”) where Berryman’s ambivalence towards modern American culture and society is presented as a lament for “the reduction of the ideals of the Republic to

automatism.”⁶¹ That “automatism” is described in the first two stanzas of Dream Song 22, with each line representing on one level a group of American citizens, from “the little man who smokes & smokes” to the “government official & a goddamned fool.” On another level, however, Dream Song 22 provides a portrait of a society in crisis and it exposes the shallowness of American capitalist culture: “I am the auto salesman and love you”. The debasement of knowledge in a culture increasingly dependent upon the media, and television in particular, is also described in this Dream Song: “I am two eyes screwed to my set, whose blind—”. In short, Berryman describes some of the major transformations that were taking place in American culture in the post-war period in Dream Song 22: Henry may be “a human American man” but he is also “Lazarus with a plan / to get his own back, a plan, a stratagem / no newsman will unravel.” (DS 91)

(ii)

Berryman’s decision to publish *Berryman’s Sonnets* between 77 *Dream Songs* and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* in 1966 was, to a large degree, dictated by financial considerations. As Charles Thornbury has suggested, Berryman needed to supplement his income in that year so that he and his family would be comfortable during their time in Ireland and since the *Sonnets* “was the most complete work at hand, [...] the collection would bring in the income he needed. The double recognition of the Pulitzer and the Guggenheim assured that his next publication would be in demand.” (CP 304-5) Berryman wrote a Dream Song epigraph for *Berryman’s Sonnets* that draws attention to the relationship between the “private” and the “public” elements of the sequence, but it also pertains to the critical project of *The Dream Songs*. In the second and third stanzas of this Dream Song Berryman writes:

...The original fault
will not be undone by fire.

The original fault was whether wickedness
was soluble in art. History says it is,
Jacques Maritain says it is,
barely. So free them to the winds that play,
let boys & girls with these old songs have holiday
if they feel like it.

(CP 70)

The “original fault” in one sense refers to the fact that Berryman had an affair in 1947, which cannot be denied or “undone by fire.” More generally, however, this Dream Song outlines the basic terms for a longer meditation on the limits of poetic discourse in relation to its ability to contain or describe “wickedness” of all kinds: personal, political, and historical.

At times the couple described in *Berryman's Sonnets* appears to ridicule the ostentatious grandeur of Princeton and the “College of cocktails, a few gentlemen, / Of whippersnappers and certain serious boys” (CP 74), satirised a few decades earlier in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise* (1920). In an essay on Fitzgerald’s work written in 1946, Berryman describes the “general subject” of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as “the irresponsible world of American wealth in the early twenties”, and he argues that Fitzgerald’s career displays “the difficulty and danger an artist undergoes who must do his work in a culture essentially confused in the way and to the degree that ours is.” (FP 198, 202) In *Berryman's Sonnets* Berryman describes Princeton in the 1940s as an equally “irresponsible world” to that suggested by Fitzgerald in his novels, where “The Old Boys’ blazers like a Mardi-Gras / Burn orange, border black, their dominoes / Stagger the green day down the tulip rows / Of the holiday town.” (CP 79) The “wickedness” described here is very different to the evils of the Holocaust examined in the poems of “The Black Book” (CP 154-56) or some of the bleaker pieces of *The Dispossessed*, but *Berryman's Sonnets* nonetheless exposes a scene of sensual indulgence that Berryman (and Fitzgerald before him) came to see as a kind of Hell. In Sonnet 116 (added to the

sequence in 1966) Berryman writes: “The cause of our story / which led us up from Hell to Purgatory / then again downwards, has been fully penned / and stands mysterious”. (CP 128) These lines suggest not only that Berryman regretted the affair, but that it was in some sense emblematic of a greater error. The nature of that error (or “fall”) is contemplated at length in *The Dream Songs* where “What he has now to say is a long / wonder the world can bear & be.” (DS 1)

Berryman’s “long wonder” in *The Dream Songs* concerns “the world” and not just the existence of one individual living in it, or the limited experience of a “conditional, circumstantial world” as Orr puts it. More specifically, it concerns the American world of the Cold War period. Unlike Jacques Maritain, for whom “wickedness” is (“barely”) “soluble in art,” as Berryman puts it in the Dream Song epigraph to *Berryman’s Sonnets*, the poet of *The Dream Songs* insists on confronting or “re-enacting” the “crime” (DS 222), rather than attempting to establish distance from it. In *Art and Poetry* (1945), Maritain suggested that “The essential question is not to know if a novelist can or cannot paint a particular aspect of evil. The essential question is to know *at what height* he places himself to make this painting, and if his heart and his art are pure enough, and strong enough to make it without connivance.”⁶² In *The Dream Songs* Berryman denies Maritain’s imperative of artistic detachment by taking Henry down from his perch, as the first Dream Song describes it (“Once in a sycamore I was glad / all at the top, and I sang”) and placing him in the thick of things, “in the middle of the world”:

He lay in the middle of the world, and twitcht.
More Sparine for Pelides,
human (half) & down here as he is,
with probably insulting mail to open
and certainly unworthy words to hear
and his unforgivable memory.

(DS 53)

To an advocate of narrow confessionalism the most significant aspect of this stanza is the reference to the drug Sparine in the first line, which is interpreted as an autobiographical declaration of Berryman's dependence on tranquillisers. The literary references in the second and last lines of Dream Song 53, however, exemplify Berryman's strategy of expansive intertextual engagement in *The Dream Songs*. That strategy extends the interpretative boundaries of the text beyond the confines of the autobiographical author-self and signals an engagement with a broader world of cultural and historical experience than the merely "circumstantial world" of Orr's analysis.

The intertextual and expansive aspects of Berryman's borrowing of a line from Gottfried Benn in Dream Song 53—"We are using our own skins for wallpaper and we cannot win"—were entirely overlooked by Alvarez when he used it as an epigraph to an article on "Extremist" poetry in the *Times Literary Supplement* in March 1967.⁶³ Alvarez makes a number of errors in his article, which Berryman corrected in his copy of it, now held among the John Berryman Papers at the University of Minnesota. In his article Alvarez misquotes the line borrowed from Benn in Dream Song 53 by leaving out the word "own." More significantly, he places Berryman's name after the quote: Berryman wrote "Gottfried Benn" after it in his copy of the newspaper. This might be brushed aside as a fairly trivial detail, given the fact that Berryman agreed to be interviewed by Alvarez in a BBC feature in 1967, and in general he respected him as one of the most able critics of the time.⁶⁴ What is at stake here, however, is Alvarez's refusal to take seriously the radical cultural engagements of *The Dream Songs* by focusing on what he describes in his article as the "Extremist" poet's "[pursuit of] his insights to the edge of breakdown and then beyond it, until mania, depression, paranoia and the hallucinations that come in psychosis are induced by drugs become as urgent and as commonplace as Beauty, Truth, Nature and the Soul were to the Romantics."⁶⁵ Alvarez ignores the fact that the quote he uses as an epigraph is from Benn: to do so would be to recognise a

centrifugal intertextual impulse in a text he insists is irreversibly centripetal in its methods and interests. Berryman makes a number of allusions to the German poet's writings in *The Dream Songs*, perhaps the most significant of which is the veiled translation of Benn's poem "Nachtcafé" ("Night Café")⁶⁶ in Dream Song 4. Benn's poem ends:

*Die Tür fleisst hin: Ein Weib.
Wüsste ausgedörrt. Kanaanitisch braun.
Keusch. Höhlenreich. Ein Duft kommt mit.
Kaum Duft.
Es ist nur eine süsse Vorwölbung der Luft
gegen mein Gehirn.*

Eine Fettlebigkeit trippelt hinterher.

(The door dissolves: a woman.
Desert dried out. Canaanite brown.
Chaste. Full of caves. A scent comes with her. Hardly scent.
It's only a sweet leaning forward of the air
against my brain.

A paunched obesity waddles after her.)⁶⁷

In Dream Song 4 a similar set of circumstances is described, with some slight alterations; there the woman in the restaurant is not "Canaanite" but "Latin": she has "Black hair, complexion Latin, jewelled eyes". In place of a "paunched obesity waddl[ing] after her", a "slob beside her feasts..."

The parallel between Benn's "Nachtcafé" and Dream Song 4 suggests that *The Dream Songs* continues the project of intertextual layering noted in the previous chapter's analysis of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, which signifies Berryman's challenge to the established order—and authority—of mainstream American culture and the "Whitman-Williams isolationist" line described by Karl Shapiro.⁶⁸ Ignoring or undervaluing the aesthetic and ideological significance of these allusions and references in Berryman's work, critics such as Alvarez represent *The Dream Songs* as if Berryman "addressed the most secluded part of their selves, revealing depths they hardly suspected or allowing them to share in ordeals he helped them to understand and to overcome", as Paul de

Man has said of the relationship between Rilke and some of his commentators.⁶⁹ De

Man is in fact one of the most important critics of narrow confessionality, and in

Allegories of Reading he describes how:

The initial seduction, the first intimacy between Rilke and his readers almost inevitably occurs as an ambiguous complicity in shared confrontation with “the near impossibility of living.” Some passages of *Malte*, large fragments of the correspondence, the general tonality of *The Book of Hours*, or a somewhat hasty reading of *Duino Elegies*—all orient the reading in that direction. This tendency, which Rilke did nothing to discourage, contributed to the formation and success of the personal myth. It also left extensive traces in Rilke studies: it is sometimes difficult to discover the memory of the original texts under the abundant confessional discourse that it generates in the commentators. Rilke’s considerable audience is in part based on a relationship of complicity, on shared weaknesses.⁷⁰

De Man’s scepticism regarding the critic’s presumption of empathy with the author (in this case Rilke) may be applied, for example, to Alan Williamson’s analysis of the “I” figure in *The Dream Songs* which is, he suggests, “a voice we recognize complexly as we do a friend’s”⁷¹.

In Dream Song 204 Henry invokes Rilke to “come on strong” but in general Berryman is quite dismissive of Rilke in *The Dream Songs*, calling him “a jerk” in Dream Song 3, and “disgusting” in Dream Song 294, thus suggesting perhaps another parallel between Berryman and Benn who once called Rilke “this little runt of a man, concealing his often degenerate existence in delicate, sickly, shameless and at the same time crafty and for ever squinting and cringing subterfuges.”⁷² The importance of de Man’s critique of confessionality, however, resides in its recognition of the way that critics often establish a level of empathy between themselves and an author, “an ambiguous complicity in shared confrontation with ‘the near impossibility of living.’” This is precisely the case where Alvarez’s commentary on Berryman and other so-called “Extremist” poets in *The Savage God* is concerned. Alvarez’s book begins with an account of his friendship with Sylvia Plath and ends with a description of his own breakdown and attempted suicide: “After all this, I have to admit that I am a failed suicide. It is a dismal

confession to make, since nothing, really, would seem to be easier than to take your own life.”⁷³ Alvarez’s study of “Extremist” artists is therefore framed by his own experiences: his description of their work is driven by a desire for empathy, a “shared confrontation” with the problems of emotional and psychological turmoil. Alvarez’s study may be described as an example of the kind of “confessional discourse” de Man discerns in Rilke studies, although in this case de Man’s terms adhere to the critical reception of poets such as Berryman, Lowell, and Plath. Alvarez is a narrow confessional critic whose commentary on Berryman is less concerned with an actual description of his poetry than it is with arguing for its relevance (and authenticity) with respect to his own experience. Studies such as *The Savage God* make it “difficult to discover the memory of the original texts,” because they distract attention from (inter)textual issues by concentrating on matters of autobiography and psychology. Although Alvarez applauds Lowell’s ability to avoid “sinking into the witless morass of ‘confessional’ verse”⁷⁴ his study is one of the best examples of confessional critical prose.

(iii)

Asked if teaching got in the way of his work as a poet in an interview in 1970, Berryman said that “It has forced me out into areas where I wouldn’t otherwise have been, and since I am a scholar, these things are connected.”⁷⁵ Commentators often fail to appreciate the relevance of Berryman’s professional scholarly engagement with literature, ideas, and culture in appraisals of his work. As Berryman puts it in the same interview:

Suppose I’m lecturing on Augustine. My Latin is very rusty, but I’ll pay a certain amount of attention to the Latin text in the Loeb edition, with the English across the page. Then I’ll visit the library and consult five or six old and recent works on St. Augustine, who is a particular interest of mine anyway. Now all that becomes part of your equipment for poetry, even for lyric poetry. The Bradstreet poem is a very learned poem. There is a lot of theology in it, there is a lot of theology in *The Dream Songs*. Anything is useful to a poet. Take observations of nature, of which I have absolutely none. It makes possible a world of moral observation for Frost, or Hopkins. So scholarship and teaching are directly useful to my activity as a writer.⁷⁶

Berryman's remark that he had no "observations of nature" might be contested by citing Dream Songs 62, 63, or 107, where he scrutinises the habits of rabbits, bats, and racoons respectively. More important, however, is his description of the way that scholarship and his engagement with literature and the history of ideas and culture in general are a part of his "equipment" in the creation of poetry.

The title of Alvarez's study *The Savage God* is taken from a comment made by Yeats after seeing the first performance of Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Roi* in Paris in December 1896. Described by Terence Brown as a "horrendous assault upon theatrical decorum"⁷⁷, *Ubu Roi* shocked Yeats into writing that he had witnessed the birth of "the Savage God":

I go to the first performance of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, at the Théâtre de L'Oeuvre, with the Rhymer who had been so attractive to the girl in the bicycling costume. The audience shake their fists at one another, and the Rhymer whispers to me, 'There are often duels after these performances', and he explains to me what is happening on the stage. The players are supposed to be dolls, toys, marionettes, and now they are all hopping like wooden frogs, and I can see for myself that the chief personage, who is some kind of King, carries for sceptre a brush of the kind that we use to clean a closet. Feeling bound to support the most spirited party, we have shouted for the play, but that night at the Hôtel Corneille I am very sad, for comedy, objectivity, has displayed its growing power once more. I say: 'After Stéphane Mallarmé, after Paul Verlaine, after Gustave Moreau, after Puvis de Chavannes, after our own verse, after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us the Savage God.'⁷⁸

In Dream Song 364 Berryman writes: "*There is one book that Henry hasn't read: / Ubu Roi. He feeling ignorant whenever his mind brings it up.*" Of course there is no reason why Berryman should not have read the play even if Henry had not. Although Berryman did not own a copy of it, the Wilson Library at the University of Minnesota holds several. Moreover, Henry's frequent transgressions of social decorum and moral propriety (in Dream Song 4, for example), allow us to speculate on the irony of the claim that Henry had not "read" *Ubu Roi*: although Henry is nowhere as horrible as the toilet

brush-wielding tyrant of Jarry's play, both characters represent an assault on the established social and cultural order.⁷⁹

Allusions to works of literature and culture are many and varied in *The Dream Songs* and the task of describing them has received attention from critics such as John Haffenden in his critical commentary on Berryman's work and Sean Ryder, who began the process of annotating *The Dream Songs* in an unpublished doctoral dissertation completed in 1989.⁸⁰ Neither of these works, however, tackles the problem being addressed here concerning the ideological implications of Berryman's intertextual engagements in the poem, although Ryder does suggest it as a route for further study.⁸¹ Narrow confessional readings and representations of Berryman's work, however, such as those offered by Alvarez, Perloff, and Williamson, have forestalled any consideration of his poetry's political interventions because of their focus on the poet's mental health and psychological profile. This in turn may be viewed as a refusal to engage his poetry's value as critique in the manner described by Nelson, who has remarked the conveniently apolitical emphasis of most confessional criticism. Berryman's dialogue with writers such as Yeats, Housman, Benn, Rilke, and others can be considered as an important aspect of his critical engagement with culture in *The Dream Songs*. By asserting the importance of transatlantic dialogue and exchange in *The Dream Songs*, moreover, Berryman contributes to the poetic dismantling of the myth of American exceptionalism by destabilising the isolationist authority of what Hugh Kenner has termed the "homemade" tradition.⁸² That process of destabilisation is resisted by the containment strategies common in numerous applications of the confessional paradigm to Berryman's work, and by the persistence of the idea that "the original fault" described by his poetry resides in the presumed disorder of the poet's personal life.

3. “’way off center”: Henry and the Authority of the “Homemade” Tradition

(i)

Berryman’s interrogation of mainstream American cultural authority was described in the previous chapter in terms of his representation of Anne Bradstreet, the “tenth muse” and archetypal progenitor of what Kenner terms the “homemade world” of American modernist writing. Although he does not deal with early Colonial poetry in his study, Kenner nonetheless invokes what has been called a “tenth-muse-ist” paradigm in his description of some American writers’ rediscovery of the New World in the twentieth century.⁸³ An early acknowledgement of the international character of modernism yields in the course of his analysis to a more ideologically problematic examination of the way that “modern poetry in whatever country has borne so unmistakably American an impress.”⁸⁴ The job of describing that “unmistakably American” impression has informed the work of a number of prominent American literary commentators, such as Roy Harvey Pearce and Albert Gelpi, who were examined earlier in this study. At this point it is worth remembering that Gelpi’s *The Tenth Muse* was written with the single question concerning “the separation of American poetry from its British parent” at its centre.⁸⁵ Moreover, Pearce’s *The Continuity of American Poetry* has been read as a critical text that contributed to the Cold War assertion of the independence and supremacy of American culture. First published in 1961, the year of John F. Kennedy’s inauguration as thirty-fifth President of the United States, Pearce’s text finds an interesting parallel in the Kennedy administration’s neo-colonial rhetoric. In its insistence upon the pioneering function of American poetry from Edward Taylor to Wallace Stevens, Pearce’s text is aligned with the Kennedy’s administration’s advancement of a “New Frontier.” Indeed, it is particularly telling that Pearce’s reading of Stevens begins with a description of the poem “Ploughing on Sunday” which, he argues, exemplifies Stevens’ “aspiration,

understanding, belief, commitment in the North American portion of the modern world.”⁸⁶

The “belief” in America that Pearce reads in Stevens’ poetry has been complicated by more recent critical appraisals of his work. Lee M. Jenkins, for example, has argued that “The defensive quality of Stevens’ poetics of the forties suggests a problematic relationship with the world outside the world of the poem, and with American as a nation”.⁸⁷ In Pearce’s view, Stevens’ poetry affirms a sense of American selfhood that, he claims, was heartily acknowledged by “his [i.e. Stevens’] younger peers”.⁸⁸ Pearce cites Theodore Roethke’s “A Rouse for Stevens” in support of this claim without once mentioning the clearly satirical strain of that piece. The first two stanzas of Roethke’s poem (which carries the instruction: “To Be Sung in a Young Poet’s Saloon”) read:

Wallace Stevens, what’s he done?
He can play the flitter-flad;
He can see the second sun
Spinning through the lordly cloud.

He’s imagination’s prince:
He can plink the skitter-bum;
How he rolls the vocables,
Brings the secret—right in Here!⁸⁹

Pearce’s claim regarding the “younger” generation’s acknowledgement of Stevens’ achievement is based on a piece of light verse: the tone struck by “A Rouse for Stevens,” however, is one of mockery rather than adulation. Indeed Roethke’s humorous description of Stevens’ poetic skill (“He can play the flitter-flad”) takes a less innocuous turn in the third stanza of his “Rouse” where Stevens’ wealth is alluded to: “*Wallace, Wallace, wo ist er?* / Never met him, Dutchman dear; / If I ate and drank like him, / I would be a chanticleer.” In this stanza Roethke articulates a sense of Stevens’ socio-economic distance from the poets of his generation, which was remarked by Berryman in

a letter to his mother in 1944 when he wrote: “Wallace Stevens, did I tell you, makes \$85,000 a year—which is too much for any poet.”⁹⁰

Many poets of Berryman’s generation, including Roethke, appreciated Stevens’ work, but the kind of emphatic admiration described in Pearse’s analysis is clearly overstated. If anything, their relationship with the Hartford insurance company director was deeply ambivalent, as Berryman signals in the title of his Dream Song elegy for Stevens, “So Long? Stevens.” (DS 219) Berryman often praised Stevens’ work highly in his letters, once advising his mother to “look out in the anthologies of verse you have and find two of Wallace Stevens’s [sic] early poems, ‘Sunday Morning’ and ‘*Le Monocle de Mon Oncle*’, and read them; they are very difficult but I sh[oul]d be astonished if you weren’t delighted with them”⁹¹. In “So Long? Stevens”, however, Berryman describes Stevens as “better than us; less wide”, suggesting that the older poet was significantly different to the poets of his generation. The observation that Stevens “crowed good” in the second line of Dream Song 219 is placed uncomfortably between references to “That funny money-man[?]’s” career “among the actuaries” in the third and first lines. Berryman (like Roethke) felt that there was “something” missing (“not there”) in Stevens’ “flourishing art”, which he explained in terms of Stevens’ interest in “metaphysics”:

What was it missing, then, at the man’s heart
so that he does not wound? It is our kind
to wound, as well as utter

a fact of happy world. That metaphysics
he hefted up until we could not breathe
the physics. *On our side*,
monotonous (or ever-fresh)—it sticks
in Henry’s throat to judge—brilliant, he seethe;
better than us; less wide.

Vendler—although she misquotes Berryman’s poem on two occasions by leaving out the question mark in the title and replacing “crow” with “cow” in the second line—has

described this Dream Song as “the best short brief against Stevens.”⁹² She argues that Berryman’s description of the older poet as “better than us; less wide” “is common even among those who write on Stevens. Something in Stevens seems remote, enigmatic, indecipherable, even inhuman to many readers.”⁹³

Berryman’s “counter-mutter” against Stevens in Dream Song 219, however, concerns much more than his scepticism about the “funny money-man[’s]” metaphysical interests. After all, Berryman is on record as saying that “there is a lot of theology in *The Dream Songs*” and traditional theology was born out of an engagement with Aristotelian metaphysics. Berryman’s quarrel with Stevens might be more accurately accounted for in terms of what Pearce has described as the older poet’s unshakeable “belief and commitment in the North American portion of the modern world.”⁹⁴ Pearce cites Stevens’ early poem “Ploughing on Sunday” in evidence of this stance, and he suggests that the lines “I’m ploughing on Sunday, / Ploughing North America,”⁹⁵ “defined [Stevens’] major concern: to deal with Sunday, not workaday, matters”⁹⁶. In the final stanza of Dream Song 5, however, Berryman writes:

Henry lay in de netting, wild,
while the brainfever bird did scales;
Mr Heartbreak, the New Man,
come to farm a crazy land;
an image of the dead on the fingernail
of a newborn child.

In this Dream Song, as Haffenden has noted,⁹⁷ Berryman alludes to the eighteenth century surveyor, cartographer, and writer, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (“Mr Heartbreak”), whose *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) has been described as “the first American text to ask and answer the question, ‘What is an American?’”⁹⁸ The allusion is significant because in the course of *The Dream Songs* Berryman describes the same sense of disappointment that Crèvecoeur is finally forced to recognise in his letters from the New World. True to the course of Crèvecoeur’s narrative, Dream Song 5

anticipates failure for “Mr Heartbreak,” who has “come to farm a crazy land”. As

Doreen Alvarez Saar has written:

In the opening letters, James [Crèvecoeur’s fictional narrator] celebrates America as a place where the oppressed masses of Europe are able to pursue their own self-interest as independent landowners, free from the shackles of feudal society, monarchy, and the church. In the later letters he deals with problems already causing divisions within the new society—slavery and the Revolution.⁹⁹

Berryman refuses to participate in Stevens’ celebration of America—as Pearce perceived it—or to “plough North America” on Sunday or any other day: “Henry lay in de netting, wild, / while the brainfever bird did scales”. Remembering Crèvecoeur’s final disillusionment with the Colonial enterprise, Berryman denies the possibility of a successful outcome for the man “ploughing on Sunday” in Stevens’ poem, who Pearce considers a figure of independence from the Old World and successful American self-assertion.

The ambivalent attitude towards Stevens articulated in Dream Song 219 may be read in terms of Berryman’s opposition to what contemporary critics perceived as the latent isolationist rhetoric of Stevens’ poetry, which has only very recently been deconstructed by Stevens scholars. The view of Stevens advanced by Pearce reinforces Kenner’s reading of him as a poet of the “homemade world” who, with William Carlos Williams, is set apart from the expatriates Eliot and Pound in the history of twentieth century American poetry. In “The American Intellectual and the American Dream” Berryman wrote that the “Dominant artistic influences of his generation were expatriate-American”, and he added that “neither the Pioneer nor the Immigrant nor the Settled plays any part in my heritage.”¹⁰⁰ Neither do they play any part in Henry’s permanently itinerant constitution in *The Dream Songs* where even in the “last” Dream Song a homely Thanksgiving scene is undermined by a sense of immanent departure: “My daughter’s heavier. Light leaves are flying. / Everywhere in enormous numbers turkeys will be dying / and other birds, all their wings.” (DS 385) This sense of perpetual migration is

also described in the following unpublished Dream Song which describes Henry's constant flight from the "center" and situations where he appears to be "found":

They say, The end crowns. I: 'Oh me alone'
and await echo. Absent. —Mr Bones,
humble yoursel'.
Your noble frien's is mild: be you so. Say,
Wuz accidental. —Pals, the years' toil, 'way
off center, —hell,

in dark & poor, out of the cozy, why,
I couldn't more agree. And *I* know I
failed at it, all that long
passion, not Virgil's (no) nor Danny Kaye—
in the clump of the possible I clouded my lay
with me, unstringing song

to hobble, horrid. But will *they* know? Ah,
Henry has never been found out. Sa:
come & get me,
if you can catch me. Coriol' & Lear
& Walt. An invite: find me. Mad, one mere
pride, disappearing, flee.¹⁰¹

Henry—" 'way / off center" and "out of the cozy"—is unlike Stevens' ploughman in his unfixed relation to place. Signalling an objection to the narrow confessional pursuit of a central autobiographical self ("find me") the closing lines of this unpublished Dream Song can also be read in terms of the theme of displacement that pervades *The Dream Songs* as a whole.

"The end [that] crowns" is described as "the mysterious late excellence which is the crown / of our trials & our last bride" in the closing lines of Dream Song 324, "An Elegy for W.C.W., the lovely man." Having expressed his sense of distance from Stevens in Dream Song 219, Berryman establishes his position in relation to another major figure of the "homemade" tradition, William Carlos Williams, in this Dream Song. It is significant that this Dream Song, beginning "Henry in Ireland to Bill underground", is set in Europe. Henry addresses Williams from across the transatlantic divide that he (Williams) frequently reinforced in his attempts to formulate the essential characteristics

of writing “in the American grain.” Dream Song 324 begins with an acknowledgement of Williams’ “hard work” and “good sound”, but in the second stanza Berryman admits that he does not “envy” Williams’ “triumph”:

At dawn you rose & wrote—the books poured forth—
you delivered infinite babies, in one great birth—
and your generosity
to juniors made you deeply loved, deeply:
if envy was a Henry trademark, he would envy you,
especially the being through.

Henry’s praise for Williams’ achievement is clipped by his inability to “envy” it, which limits the extent to which he is willing to identify with the Paterson poet. Recognising Williams’ “late excellence”, Henry refers to Williams’ posthumous “sweet silence” in the third stanza of this Dream Song; meanwhile “Too many journeys lie for him [i.e. Henry] ahead”. Henry’s transatlantic “journeys” may be considered as acts of ideological significance insofar as they register Berryman’s sense of distance and estrangement from the “homemade” tradition. In Dream Song 385 Henry’s house is described as “made of wood and it’s made well,” but elsewhere it is “Mortgaged to [the] hilt, / the walls & floors don’t meet, the carport calls / for a new one, & cries” as Berryman writes in the unpublished Dream Song entitled “Henry House”:

My priest-hole moulders, nil,
put in late, where sought hearts thudded. Swords
flash from the great grate’s shroud.

Ever my backward cellar, cut too small,
pruritus ani, bothers. Jerry-built,
windy—if a paper lies
on the floor it flutters. Mortgaged to their hilt,
the walls & floors don’t meet, the carport calls
for a new one, & cries.¹⁰²

Henry’s house—and “Henry House”—are precarious structures not only in terms of architecture (emphasised throughout *The Dream Songs* by the unpredictability of Berryman’s syntax), but the “house” as a centre of social, cultural, and personal identity is also a site from which Henry is invariably compelled to flee.

(ii)

Berryman's expansive acceptance of—and engagement with—a transatlantic cultural matrix in his work signals his distance from an ideological project rooted in the isolationist appraisal of the American ground of experience that is exemplified by the cultural politics of Robert Frost. Arguing that Frost's "politics is inseparable from his poetics", Gelpi has described the appeal of Kennedy's "New Frontier" politics to Frost in the 1960s "after decades of outspoken grumbling about New Deal welfare economics and one-world internationalism."¹⁰³ Writing "'way off / center," Berryman refused to reinforce the ideas of cultural exceptionalism that Frost articulated in his writings. "For Frost," as Gelpi notes, "America was the culmination of Western history, as Bishop Berkeley had foreseen, because it represented the fullest expression of Western individualism."¹⁰⁴ As the previous chapter's analysis of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* demonstrated, however, Berryman refused to celebrate the idea that "America was the culmination of Western history", and his project of dismantling the exceptionalist ideology of mainstream American authority continued into *The Dream Songs*.

In Dream Songs 35-39 Berryman addresses Frost in terms that appear to acknowledge his respectful sense of the older poet's authority: he is described as "the old gentleman" (*DS* 35 and *DS* 37), one of "The high ones" (*DS* 36), and "sir" (*DS* 39). In Dream Song 218, Frost is described as "his friend the sage", and this Dream Song appears to refer to the summer of 1962 when, while working as a teacher at the Bread Loaf School of English in Vermont, Berryman visited Frost at his home. Berryman's encounter with Frost is also described in Dream Song 37 ("Three around the Old Gentleman"), but this Dream Song is less useful as a recollection of an actual event than it is for its description of the general ambivalence that Berryman felt for the older poet. Rather than reading Dream Song 37 as an (auto)biographical account of Berryman's

meeting with Frost, it may be read as a text that signals the difference and distance between them:

His malice was a pimple down his good
big face, with its sly eyes. I must be sorry
Mr Frost has left:
I like it so less I don't understood—
he couldn't hear or see well—all we sift—
but this is a *bad* story.

In this Dream Song Berryman's attitude towards Frost (who died in January 1963) is deeply ambivalent. His "good / big face" is marred not only by a "pimple" (figuring "malice"), but by "sly eyes." Berryman feels *obliged* to mark Frost's death, that he "must be sorry / Mr Frost has left". His expressions of respect for "the Old Gentleman", in other words, are tempered by a sense that something is being left unsaid. As he writes in the third stanza of the same Dream Song: "I can't say what I have in mind."

What Berryman did "have in mind" is hinted at in the description of Frost as "difficult, always" and "Courteous, / on the whole, in private" in the second stanza of Dream Song 37. Berryman seems to be suggesting that Frost was discourteous or belligerent in public. In Dream Song 39 Berryman takes these troubling suggestions a step further and implies that Frost had committed some wrong that would never be found out now that he was dead:

Goodbye, sir, & farewell. You're in the clear.
'Nobody' (Mark says you said) 'is ever found out.'
I figure you were right,
having as Henry got away with murder
for long. Some jarred clock tell me it's late,
not for you who went straight

but for the lorn.

Berryman may "figure" Frost "with love" here but the apparently magnanimous elegiac intention is undermined by a sense of conflict which is reinforced by the same Dream Song's closing description of Henry "taking cover." The cross-reference to Dream Song 29—"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”—in the fourth line of this Dream Song also heightens the sense of tension and ambiguity in Berryman’s reminiscences of Frost.

Dream Song 72 (“The Elder Presences”) was written on the nineteenth of December 1963, less than a month after the assassination of President Kennedy, when Berryman and his family were living “just across the street from the Supreme Court Building”¹⁰⁵ in Washington. Drafted a week later, Berryman refers to the ease with which he could observe officials come and go from the Supreme Court in Dream Song 200:

I am interested & amazed: on the building across the way
from where I vaguely live there are no bars!
Best-looking place in town.
Only them lawyers big with great cigars
and lesser with briefcases, instead of minds,
move calmly in & out

and now or then an official limousine
with a live Supreme Court justice & chauffeur
mounts the ramp toward me.

Berryman is harshly critical of all forms of officialdom in *The Dream Songs*. Whether he is complaining about the inefficiency of the postal service (Dream Song 167) or making claims of harassment against the police-force (Dream Song 95), his sense of dissatisfaction with American society is clear. Berryman’s description of the “lawyers big with great cigars / [...] / mov[ing] calmly in & out” of the Supreme Court building in Dream Song 200, however, signals his awareness of the political “stalling” that Frost recognised as a defining feature of the Cold War. In a letter to the *County Government Magazine* in 1962 Frost wrote: “I hate a cold war of sustained hate that finds no relief in blood letting but probably it should be regarded as a way of stalling till we find out whether there is really an issue big enough for a big show-down.”¹⁰⁶ The capacity for violence that Berryman associates with Frost—and, by implication, American authority—in Dream Song 39 may be considered as an attempt to describe the “sustained hate that finds no relief in blood letting” described by Frost in this letter.

In 1962 Frost went as a representative of the Kennedy administration to meet Nikita Khrushkev in the Soviet Union. The rhetoric of the “New Frontier” appealed to Frost, as Gelpi has argued, in part because “The pioneer myth is the major myth of Frost’s poetry, as of his politics”¹⁰⁷. Kennedy described the “New Frontier” in terms of pioneering, as the following excerpt from one of his 1961 election speeches illustrates:

The New Frontier of which I speak is not a set of promises: it is a set of challenges. It sums up not what I intend to *offer* the American people, but what I intend to *ask* of them. [...] I am asking each of you to be new pioneers on that New Frontier.¹⁰⁸

Berryman, however, refused to answer this call to become a “new pioneer on that New Frontier,” and his critique of the Colonial idealisation of the New World in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* is brought up to date in *The Dream Songs* in terms of his rejection of the authority of the “homemade” tradition, which represented the cultural front of American power in the face of Soviet antagonism during the Cold War. As Derval Tubridy puts it, “the rhetoric of the ‘New Frontier’ was powerful and inclusive. It sought to harness the patriotism of war in a time of peace and prosperity.”¹⁰⁹ Berryman refused to accept the exceptionalist rhetoric of the “New Frontier,” however, and in another Dream Song about Frost he writes: “*Nobody’s* great. / I must remember that.” (*DS* 230; emphasis added) In the same Dream Song Frost is described as “our flunked test.” Berryman’s interrogation of Frost’s authority in terms of his role as cultural spokesperson for the Kennedy administration and its “New Frontier” politics is an important aspect of his critique of what in “Formal Elegy” (written after the assassination of Kennedy in 1963) he would term the contemporary American “scene of disorder.” (*CP* 165)

4. “The Scene of Disorder”: Berryman on the “New Frontier”

(i)

Inviting a comparison between what Berryman perceived as the demise of modern American culture and earlier dynasties and civilisations, the Kennedy era is described as “dynasty K” in the third stanza of Dream Song 105. In Dream Song 102 Berryman refers to the ancient civilisation at Machu Picchu and to the fact that “the thousand years’ authority” that once existed there was eventually reduced to nothing. “Macchu Pichu [sic] died / like Delphi long ago” he writes, before going on to describe the destruction of:

The Shining Ones behind the shrine, whose verge
saw the impious plunged, 6,000 statues
above the Temple shone

plundered, centuries plundered, first the gold
then bronze & marble, then the plinths,
then the dead nerve—
root-canal-work, ugh.

The theme of lost civilisations is revisited in Dream Song 197: “I saw in my dream / the great lost cities, Macchu Picchu [sic], Cambridge Mass., Angkor / I wonder if it’s raining on Macchu Picchu or / Cambridge Mass, as here....” Describing Cambridge, Massachusetts as one of “the great lost cities” Berryman repeats the claim advanced in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* concerning the unrealised cultural promise of the early Colonial enterprise. The idea that America has failed to produce any great centres of culture is reiterated in Dream Song 210 where Richard Blackmur is asked: “—Mr Blackmur, what are the holy cities of America?”

In the third stanza of Dream Song 197, however, the destruction of older civilisations such as Machu Picchu and Angkor Wat is forgotten as Henry wakes from his dream into a troubled twentieth century: “Baseball, & the utter bloody fucking news / converged on miserable Henry”. The final two-word line of this Dream Song (“Henry

hid”) echoes the opening line of the first Dream Song (“Huffy Henry hid the day”) but the convergence of “Baseball” and bad “news” on “miserable Henry” is particularly significant in the light of Berryman’s description of “the job of the poet”, which he claimed is “to handle signs, to field them as in baseball.”¹¹⁰ The baseball figure in Dream Song 197, then, refers less to the American ball-game than it does to the business of writing poetry itself, which is bound up with reading the world and considering daily “the utter bloody fucking news” as it is mediated by newspapers and television.

Berryman denied that his poetry was overtly political in an interview in 1968. His denial, however, should be considered as a rejection of the hot-headed political activism of poets such as Bly rather than an injunction against the political possibilities of poetry in general. Berryman’s interrogation of the authority of the “homemade” tradition in his Dream Song elegies for Stevens and Williams, and in the cycle of Dream Songs for and about Frost, shows that Bly’s comment regarding his (Berryman’s) respect for the American “cultural hierarchy” is at best rash, if not misinformed. In those Dream Songs, situated at various stages across all seven books of the poem as a whole, Berryman undermines any sense of a comfortable relation between himself and the home (or “homemade”) tradition. Indeed Henry’s confrontations with American authority are not limited to the cultural front. Berryman’s dissatisfaction with American society is also registered by his description of “the increasingly fanatical Americans / [who] cannot govern themselves” in Dream Song 31 and Henry’s perennial transatlantic migrations in *The Dream Songs* suggest a radically disaffected and displaced identity enduring “A final sense of being right out in the cold” (DS 3). For Henry, “Travel’s a plague. But that’s no matter. So is home.” (DS 252)

Berryman’s unwillingness to share in the general sense of optimism that is often associated with the Kennedy era in modern American history is described in Dream Song 245 (“A Wake Song”), which is subtitled “K’s first administration seen in the light of the

relevant history.” Berryman offers an unflattering anatomy of the Kennedy administration in this Dream Song:

Find me a sur-vivid fool, find me another
able to run the first, find me two fools
with an absence of skills
and each must do precisely sublimely the same
& pry on each other, under,—and lest this be seen
let there in their offices sub-fools

with sub-fools interfere. Doing aught else—
(there is a work called *The Republic*): over them set
an Ivy appointee
who knows about from no & nowhere; also then
let the elected officials (none though in jail)
diarrhea about Democracy,

starting with the Harlem vicer. By a friction-vote
barely let Boston millions in, dies the opponent
(in public opinion,
the crude of the 'papers.) Keep on doing that.
I personally have voted Democratic all my life
and hate foreign ideas.

The idea that the Kennedy administration is overrun by bureaucrats is clearly expressed, but this is less significant as a critique of government than the general picture of a ruling elite (“over them set / an Ivy appointee”) that is made up of “fools” and “sub-fools.” The reference to “the Harlem vicer”—identified by Haffenden as Adam Clayton Powell Junior (1908-1972), a pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York who led boycotts and marches against businesses that discriminated on the basis of colour¹¹¹—draws attention to the persistence of racial violence in the United States while “the elected officials (none though in jail) / diarrhea about Democracy”.

Gelpi records the way that “Kennedy’s call to the ‘New Frontier’ [...] reconciled Frost to the Democratic Party after decades of outspoken grumbling and about New Deal welfare economics and one-world internationalism.”¹¹² In the footnotes that are appended to Dream Song 245, however, Berryman distances himself even further from

“K’s first administration” and aligns himself with a tradition of writers (“mad-dogs”)

more harshly critical of American authority than Frost:

- 1) Our contempt for our government is mildly traditional, as represented by the communistic fascists Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Edmund Wilson, and other mad-dogs.
- 2) Anyone’s professional experience with our officials moronic will instruct him. Although with a lawyer’s stupidity they cannot get a date right, their demands are Pharaoh’s, until you make them cringe; whom we support, whose servants they purport to be.

In these notes—and in this Dream Song—Berryman is clearly “setting [his] sights against the *whole* of American society, which is a dangerous business”, as he said of his own involvement with journals such as the *Partisan Review* in the 1940s.¹¹³

In an unpublished Dream Song beginning with the lines “I like my Scottish than my English blood / bettther [sic], brogued Henry” Berryman writes: “Washington have been murdering us // with their spendthrift phantasy of ONE”¹¹⁴. Associated with the centre of American government and power in Washington, Berryman’s rejection of the “spendthrift phantasy of ONE” may be read in terms of his disavowal of the idealist politics of “K’s first administration” in Dream Song 245. Washington is figured in Dream Song 72 (“The Elder Presences”) as a place of ruin and disorder, panic and fear, where “justices lean” and “man’s try began too long ago, with chirrs / & leapings, begging pardon—”. Demanding the reader’s attention at the start of this Dream Song (“Shh!”), Berryman draws attention to the “The Elder Presences” based in Washington but, more importantly, he exposes the persistence of racial hatred in the United States at a time when the ideals of American democracy were being widely promoted at home and abroad. The Dream Song’s opening image of “a twine hung from disastered trees” calls to mind the lynching of individuals as innocent as Henry’s daughter: what begins as a scene of innocence and security—a father playing with his daughter in the Supreme Court garden—gives way to a more sinister representation of the racial inequality and violence in American society.

Aldon Lynn Nielsen has argued that Berryman “reasserts the [white] discourse’s marking of the otherness of the nonwhite, even while attempting to argue on the other’s behalf” in *The Dream Songs*.¹¹⁵ Nielsen fails to appreciate Berryman’s overall critique of American society, however, and the fact that in this and other Dream Songs Berryman’s object is to expose the shortcomings of American democracy rather than celebrate it. Berryman may not “deconstruct the discourse of racism within the American language”¹¹⁶ in Dream Song 72 or in *The Dream Songs* more generally, but he nonetheless attempts to dismantle the idealist rhetoric of exceptionalism that informed the Kennedy administration’s understanding of American democracy. Henry denies the authority of “The Elder Presences” in Washington in Dream Song 72 and he takes the side of the under-represented African-Americans whom “they” (the “elected officials” of Dream Song 245) “overlook”:

I will deny the gods of the garden say.
Henry’s perhaps to break his burnt-cork luck.
I further will deny
good got us up that broad shoreline. Greed may
like a fuse, but with a high shore we is stuck,
whom they overlook. Why,—

Henry’s attempt to query the relationship between American democracy and racial injustice is cut short at the end of this Dream Song. Racial inequality in the United States, however, is read as a consequence of the “Greed” which “like a fuse” was recognised by Berryman as a major problem in American society as early as 1947 when in “The American Intellectual and the American Dream” he described the pervasiveness of “American *pleonexia*.”¹¹⁷

Berryman writes of his disillusionment with American society and the hypocrisy he believed persisted through to the Kennedy era in an unpublished Dream Song that begins with the lines, “Patriot Henry loved his country. Ay. / So did his great-great-great-great-grandfather. Yea! Haha!”¹¹⁸ Berryman’s use of the past tense (“loved”) is

significant here, as is Henry's identification with his "great-great-great-great-grandfather." Once Henry comes back to his senses in the here-and-now of the twentieth century, however, his attitude towards "his country" changes. Berryman writes: "Henry can't find language with people so vile / who donno [sic] they're vile." In this unpublished *Dream Song*, and throughout the entire published poem, Berryman expresses his dissatisfaction not only with the persistence of racial violence in the United States but with what he saw as the "vileness" of contemporary American society in general. Nielsen asks of *The Dream Songs*: "How seriously can readers take an argument for the recognition of the rights of Afro-Americans when the argument is couched in derisive terms and made in the course of an oneiric 'coon show'?"¹¹⁹ Berryman suggests, however, that the language of American democracy is in itself corrupt. As Susan Gubar has written:

Why would Berryman focus his verse on injustice—social, political, racial—in a language so polluted with the guilt of past oppressions? [...] But perhaps readers are meant to take seriously not simply the civil rights contentions [of various *Dream Songs*] but their incongruent relation to the contemptuous framework in which they appear, a framework that mordantly measures the failure of even the most sympathetic Euro-Americans.¹²⁰

Gubar recognises Berryman's attempts to describe as fully as possible "the contemptuous framework" within which *The Dream Songs* takes its place in twentieth-century American cultural history—the "scene of disorder" described in "Formal Elegy."

(ii)

Rarely attended to in the broader surveys of his work, "Formal Elegy" occupies a peculiar and precarious place in Berryman criticism.¹²¹ First published in Erwin A. Glikes and Paul Schwaber's *Of Poetry and Power: Poems Occasioned by the Presidency and Death of John F. Kennedy* (1964),¹²² this poem of almost one hundred lines has commanded relatively little attention in Berryman studies. Nevertheless, the poem occupies an important place in the Berryman canon, a point attested to by Berryman's decision to include it in his

Short Poems (1967). In a note to his mother inscribed inside the cover of a copy of *Of Poetry and Power* that he sent to her for Christmas 1964, Berryman wrote that:

The London *Times* [*Literary Supplement*] that came today reviews the book [*Of Poetry and Power*] in a notice that is largely a view of my poem which it calls “the best & most memorable” and quotes 3 times, observing that all my recent “poems” are a stealthy & learned attack on poetic convention. They have *still* not reviewed 77 *Dream* Songs, but word comes from Oxford that “respectful, admiring reviews” appeared there last month and the first foreign view came from *The Jerusalem Post* last week: “the best poetry of the decade.”¹²³

Berryman was certainly pleased with this high praise—although he often discredited such journalistic bombast as well. As he put it in a Dream Song first published in 1999: “every time most people praise me / I think there must be something wrong with my style / trudging away at perfection.”¹²⁴ However, Berryman had little reason to doubt the praise of the anonymous *TLS* reviewer who, in his discussion of “Formal Elegy,” drew attention (albeit inadvertently) to important aspects of *The Dream Songs* that have been generally subsumed beneath the confessional paradigm.

The reviewer in the *TLS* wrote that Berryman’s poem was “the best and most memorable in [the] anthology,” because “Formal Elegy” exhibited a degree of stylistic innovation that was largely lacking in many of the other contributions to the collection, which included poems by writers as diverse in their formal interests as Frost, Auden, and Ginsberg. “Most of the poems here,” the reviewer wrote, “settle less ambitiously for a simpler, popular style.”¹²⁵ Ballads are plentiful in the anthology, and the reviewer singles out Richard Eberhart and X. J. Kennedy for particular praise. It is worth noting, however, that the contributions of such self-conscious innovators as Louis Zukofsky and Barbara Guest, in particular, are not mentioned in the review. Zukofsky writes about Kennedy’s assassination in section 15 of his long poem “*A*”, where he zones in on the particularly troublesome issue of the media representation of Kennedy’s assassination, which has been described by Fredric Jameson as “a unique media event, not least because it was a unique collective (and media, communicational) experience.”¹²⁶

the nation
a world
mourned
three days in
dark and in
daylight
glued to TV
grieved as a family
the Kennedys were a family—¹²⁷

It is regrettable that Haffenden makes no reference to either “Formal Elegy” or Berryman’s response to Kennedy’s assassination in his biography of the poet. Paul Mariani suggests that Kennedy’s death had a large and immediate personal impact on the poet. When Kennedy was assassinated Berryman was staying at the Chelsea Hotel in New York and in his account of this time Mariani tells how:

When President Kennedy was assassinated [...] Berryman rented a television and sat stunned and mesmerized before it for the next four days, horrified by what he was witnessing: the telescopic rifle found on the sixth floor of the Depository, news of Patrolman Tippit’s death, Oswald’s murder. [...] He knew as well as anyone Kennedy’s failings, especially the Bay of Pigs fiasco. He even wondered if he would have voted for him in 1964. But he was numbed to learn that schoolgirls in Dallas had actually cheered when they’d heard their president had been struck down.¹²⁸

Reading Mariani’s version of Berryman’s reaction to Kennedy’s assassination, “Formal Elegy” might be expected to begin like Walt Whitman’s long lament for Abraham Lincoln, with an outpouring of personal sorrow and loss.¹²⁹ Berryman’s poem, however, is more concerned with describing the effects that Kennedy’s assassination had on the nation as a whole than with its immediate impact on the poet himself:

Scuppered the yachts, the choppers, big cars, jets.
Nobody goes anywhere,
lengthened (days) into TV.
I am four feet long, invisibly.
What in the end will be left of us is a stare,
underwater.

(CP 163)

Watching the replays of the president's assassination on television in the days following his death, Berryman was concerned to record and describe the atmosphere of stasis and distortion that overwhelmed the nation.

In the opening section of "Formal Elegy" (the poem has ten sections of irregular length), Berryman provides a disturbing picture of the general state of affairs in the immediate aftermath of Kennedy's death. Describing the high ideals of the Kennedy administration and its "New Frontier" politics Berryman writes that: "These kills were not for loot, / however Byzantium hovers in the mind". (CP 163) The poem begins with an image of water:

A hurdle of water, and O these waters are cold
(warm at the outset) in the dirty end.
Murder on murder on murder, where I stagger,
whiten the good land where we have held out.
These kills were not for loot,
however Byzantium hovers in the mind:
were matters of principle—that's worst of all—
& fear & crazed mercy.

(CP 163)

Berryman realises that the death of Kennedy marks the end of a brief but important era in modern American history, although he admits in section VI of the poem that, "I would not perhaps have voted for him next time." (CP 164) Berryman's elegy, in other words, is not a eulogy for Kennedy. In section IV Berryman writes that "a-many" people had climbed on board the Kennedy bandwagon—"Onto him climbed / a-many and went his way"—unquestioning of what he calls the "too Andean hopes" of the "New Frontier." (CP 163)

In section VII, which is the shortest (two-line) section of the poem, Berryman writes: "My breath comes heavy, does my breath. / I feel heavy about the President's death." (CP 164) Part of the weight or burden that Berryman feels, however, is caused by the fact that Kennedy's assassination shocked people into realising that "For a while

we seemed to be having a holiday / off from ourselves—”. (CP 164) Seduced by the rhetoric of the “New Frontier” the American people had placed their faith in the figure Berryman describes as the “apprentice King” in section X. (CP 165) Jameson has argued that the occasion of Kennedy’s assassination marked a watershed in the history of the American experience of the media, and of the role that television plays in American social life in the way that it affects perceptions and constructions of reality. In more elaborate terms than those employed by Zukofsky in “A” 15, Berryman’s poem attempts to describe the almost continuous broadcast of images of Kennedy’s death, and the impact this had on the American public. Much of the “action” of “Formal Elegy” takes place under water, in a strange world where bullets “swim” (CP 165) and motorcars can speak: “I am an automobile. Into me climb / many, and go their ways.” (CP 163) The strangeness evoked by Berryman’s poem describes the extent to which people were cast into a prolonged period of mourning and confusion by Kennedy’s assassination. In section V Berryman pre-empts Jameson’s claims regarding the way in which the representation of Kennedy’s death on (and by) television altered the nation’s way of seeing—and their way of mourning—by describing the defamiliarising affects that the constant stream of images had on the national consciousness. Berryman’s poem describes those images in terms of a “weaving snake” that prevented people from going about their “normal” lives, affected their sleep-patterns and their work:

Some in their places are constrained to weep.
Stunned, more, though.
Black foam. A weaving snake. An invulnerable sleep.
It doing have to come so.
All at once, hurtless, in the tide of applause
& expectation. I write from New York
where except for a paraplegic exterminator—
a gracious & sweet guy—
nobody has done no work
lately

(CP 164)

Berryman's infuriatingly odd use of syntax ("Stunned, more, though"), and his disobedient grammatical structures and inversions ("It doing have to come so"), accentuate the sense of numbness and strangeness that pervaded American society in the period after Kennedy's death.

Berryman describes the protracted period of public mourning for Kennedy in *Dream Song 200*, set in the Christmas of 1963, almost six weeks after the president's death: "My wife's candle is out / for John F. Kennedy". In the concluding section of "Formal Elegy," however, the poem's opening image of "A hurdle of water" seems much less insurmountable than it is at the outset:

It's quiet at Arlington. Rock Creek is quiet.
My primers, with Mount Auburn. Everybody should
have his sweet boneyards. Yet let the young not go,
our apprentice King! Alas,
muffled, he must. He seemed good:
brainy in riot, daring, cool.

(*CP* 165)

The drawn out slumber described in the third section of the poem—"lengthened (days) into TV"—(*CP* 163) is now replaced by an air of optimism and hope for the future: "We compose our faces / cold as the cresting waters; ready again." (*CP* 165) Berryman's figure of a necessary and unavoidable confrontation with the sea here alludes to the closing lines of Yeats's "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" where "Cuchulain stirred / Stared on the horses of the sea, and heard / The cars of battle and his own name cried; / And fought with the invulnerable tide."¹³⁰ Berryman's reading of Yeats's "cars of battle" in terms of modern automobiles and his conflation of the image of Cuchulain fighting "the invulnerable tide" with his own description of a nation confronting an "invulnerable sleep" (*CP* 164) suggests the possibility of a new order arising out of the disorder of the past. However, Berryman is finally less concerned with reinforcing the possibilities of

some new order than he is with insisting that the old order must be abandoned: “So / let us abandon the scene of disorder.” (CP 165)

It is clear from Berryman’s acknowledgement that Kennedy “*seemed good*” in the final section of “Formal Elegy” (CP 165; emphasis added) that he is not calling for a continuation of “New Frontier” politics and policies when he writes in the poem’s final line: “Let us continue.” (CP 166) Rather, the end of Berryman’s poem echoes the conclusion of Milton’s “Lycidas,” the poem described by the protagonist of Berryman’s short story “Wash Far Away” as “the chief poem of the world” (FP 367).¹³¹ The title of “Wash Far Away” is taken from lines 154-55 of “Lycidas,” where Milton writes: “Ay me! Whilst thee the shores and sounding seas / Wash far away, where’re thy bones are hurled.”¹³² Clearly, Berryman draws on the example of “Lycidas” in “Formal Elegy,” and the sense of distortion that he gauges in American society is articulated in terms not unlike those used in Milton’s poem. More crucially, however, “Formal Elegy” is less concerned with a description of the poet’s personal grief and bewilderment than it is with the state of the nation, just as Milton’s elegy for Edward King includes an important and highly critical appraisal of the state of the church in seventeenth century England.

In a review of Frost’s *Selected Letters*, Randall Jarrell suggests that: “The realist Frost had always been romantic about power; his life ended in a dream of power.”¹³³ In those Dream Songs that deal with the figure of Frost, Berryman establishes an important sense of distance between himself and what he would have agreed with Jarrell was Frost’s belief in the conjunction of “power and poetry in the age of Kennedy”¹³⁴. Although Berryman would later revise his view of Frost somewhat in his reading of “The Draft Horse” in the poem “Lines to Mr Frost” (CP 249), in *The Dream Songs* and “Formal Elegy” he is highly critical of the exceptionalist rhetoric of the “New Frontier” era, which Frost accepted wholeheartedly as a solution not only for America’s problems but, as Jarrell writes, he (Frost) believed that “his words to Khrushchev [would] help to

transform the cold war into an honorable rivalry between the two great powers of the world”¹³⁵. In the closing section of “Formal Elegy” Berryman writes that “A rifle fact is over, pistol facts / almost entirely are too.” (*CP* 166) The illusion of national and social unity promoted by the prolonged period of mourning for Kennedy, however, is shattered in *The Dream Songs* where Berryman not only suggests that American society is in a permanent state of “disorder” but that “Nothing’s the same, / sir,—taking cover.” (*DS* 39) Kennedy and Frost—who died within a few months of each other—may be “in the clear”, as Berryman puts it in Dream Song 39 (written after Frost’s death), but Henry remains in a world on the brink of self-destruction. As Berryman writes in a posthumously published Dream Song that was written, significantly, on the fourth of July 1968:

When will the fire be turned on? and by whom?
 heating the memory & soul alike
 until both crisp.
 Not soon, I wonder, but in some lead-shielded room
 mistakes are being made like the Third Reich
 perhaps, I lisp.

(*HF* 28)

5. Figuring Authority: Relocating the “majestic Shade”

In his essay “The Crisis” Berryman describes Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* as a play where “Giant powers are visible”.¹³⁶ In *The Dream Songs* his reading of modern authority expresses a similar awareness of “Giant powers”—cultural and political—from the “high ones” of the “homemade” tradition (*DS* 36), to “The Elder Presences” in Washington (*DS* 72), and the “majestic Shade” of Dream Song 312. In disguise, wearing “his burnt-cork” (*DS* 72), Henry resembles the character of Vincentio, the Duke of Vienna in *Measure for Measure*, who pretends to leave his country so that he can return disguised as a friar to find out what has been going on there. Henry’s migrations to Europe and elsewhere in *The Dream Songs* offer him a cover, as it were, for further analysis of affairs

closer to home. While *The Dream Songs* frequently describes Henry in a state of being “away” he is also aware of events taking place closer to home: as Berryman puts it in an unpublished Dream Song fragment written in 1960: “Detached, involved, H[enry] sang.”¹³⁷ Berryman’s exposition of the illusion of political permanence that was associated with “dynasty K” is similar to Isabella’s condemnation of the official Angelo’s manipulation of power in *Measure for Measure* where, in an attempt to save her brother Claudio from execution, she reminds him of the fact that he is not a god but another “pelting petty officer”:

Could great men thunder
 As Jove himself does, Jove would never be quiet,
 For every pelting petty officer
 Would use his heaven for thunder, nothing but thunder.
 Merciful heaven,
 Thou rather with thy sharp and sulphurous bolt
 Split’st the unwedgeable and gnarled oak
 Than the soft myrtle. But man, proud man,
 Dressed in a little brief authority,
 Most ignorant of what he’s most assured,
 His glassy essence, like an angry ape
 Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
 As makes the angels weep, who, with our spleens,
 Would all themselves laugh mortal.¹³⁸

In the course of his investigations into the nature of political and cultural authority in *The Dream Songs* and “Formal Elegy” Berryman arrives at a similar conclusion to that described by Isabella regarding the transience of human forms of power.

The engagement with the “majestic Shade” described in Dream Song 312 has often been considered as a crucial site of conflict in the poem as a whole. Frequently presented as an expression of Berryman’s belated success in an Oedipal contest with Yeats, as described earlier in this study, Dream Song 312 announces Henry’s arrival in Dublin as the place he has been moving toward throughout the preceding books of the poem, from Dream Song 77 where “he’s making ready to move on”, to Dream Song 279 where “Leaving behind the country of the dead / where he must then return & die

himself / he set his tired face due East / where the sun rushes up the North Atlantic.”

When he is in Dublin, however, Henry often appears to be elsewhere. In an uncollected Dream Song published for the first time in 1999, for example, Berryman writes: “I puff: away the smoke floats, here indoors: / a north African brothel, crawling with whores / in the middle of Dublin, / Tangiers in Ireland...”¹³⁹ The idea of place as something indeterminate is also described in Dream Song 296:

Henry sat here, in Dublin’s fair city,
close to Killarney Bay.

O that bay is excellent, the Atlantic is blue
and soon we’ll take a place across it to London,
Paris & Rome & Athens
& then, if all goes well, Jerusalem
where all those fine Jews are, & holy places
imperfectly determined.

Berryman may have made an error here by writing “Killarney Bay” when he meant “Killiney Bay,” which is on the south coast of County Dublin, but that does not explain the fact that he is looking across the Atlantic when, if he is in Dublin (on the east coast), he should be looking out at the Irish Sea. It seems implausible that Berryman would have made a mistake here: confusing Killiney with Killarney is one thing, but confusing the Irish Sea with the Atlantic is quite another. Rather, it may be the case that Berryman, though living in Dublin at the time, was considering matters across the Atlantic in the same way that, while visiting Lévant in Spain in 1957, he considered events taking place in the United States in “American Lights, Seen From Off Abroad” (CP 157-59).

Berryman’s time in Dublin has been the subject of several critical and biographical accounts, many of which have contributed to the construction of the myth that his decision to move there in 1966 was based on a conscious and deliberate desire to “have it out” with the “majestic Shade” of Yeats and little else. One of the most problematic accounts of Berryman’s time in Dublin, written by John Montague, suggests that “the deeper concerns were always there: he was intrigued by the last poems of Yeats

[...] So Ireland and Yeats were no accidental choice”¹⁴⁰. While it is true that Ireland was “no accidental choice” for Berryman, he did not move to Dublin because of the city’s Yeatsian connections, nor did Berryman make the trip so that he could “have it out” with Yeats’s ghost. Three years prior to his 1966 transatlantic trip Berryman was altogether uncertain about Dublin’s suitability for a year’s sabbatical leave from his teaching duties at the University of Minnesota. Given the evidence provided by his diary for 1963, Berryman listed among the “BAD” things about Dublin as a possible location the fact that there was “no Sh[akespeare collection]” of any significance there.¹⁴¹ Berryman finally decided to spend the year in Dublin because it was “*CHEAP*; English [is] spoken [there], [and it is] n[ea]r London & [the] continent.”

Berryman’s decision to live in Dublin in 1966 was clearly not made on the basis of its Yeatsian heritage alone. Rather, Dublin was Berryman’s base for a year in Europe which would include visits to London, Paris, Athens, and Rome. Moving to *Europe* to “have it out” with the “majestic Shade,” Berryman was doing what many other American writers and artists of the time felt compelled to do during what John Ashbery has described as “a very humiliating and cynical period, a low point [when] everyone wanted to get out of the country and the political environment”¹⁴². For Berryman that period continued into the late 1960s and as late as 1969 he would say in an interview that “The current American society would drive anybody out of his skull, anybody who is at all responsive; it is almost unbearable.”¹⁴³ Berryman’s transatlantic journey to “to have it out with / [the] majestic Shade,” then, *began* as an attempt to get away from what he considered an “unbearable” situation in the United States. After all, Berryman could have spent his year’s sabbatical in America, which might have been much easier for him, his wife, and their young daughter.

In some ways similar to the speaker of Roethke’s poem “The Far Field” who says “I dream of journeys repeatedly”¹⁴⁴, the protagonist of *The Dream Songs* is always on the

move, whether oneirically or physically. In Dream Song 40 Berryman writes: “combers out to sea / know they’re goin [sic] somewhere but not me”, but Henry is more frequently found in a state of movement that he is at rest. It is as if he is being followed or chased by something, as the first line of Dream Song 116 has it: “Through the forest, followed, Henry made his silky way.” What Henry was being “followed” by may be explained by referring to Berryman’s early poem “Heritage” (written in 1939) which describes a “pitiless American” running “from the shade cast / Across his country by the past // As if it were a thing alive / and monstrous.”¹⁴⁵ The “shade” of this poem signifies the American past, the “heritage” that he rejected by turning towards Yeats at the start of his career. If Berryman rejects the authority of the “majestic Shade” in Dream Song 312, however, it is done so that he can ask: “Were there any other gods he could defy, / he wondered, or re-arrange?” in Dream Song 314.

Re-arrangement, rather than aiming at security, is crucial to Berryman’s creation of uncertainty in *The Dream Songs*. In Dream Song 296 Berryman re-arranges a set of real geographical locations (Killarney for Killiney) so that it becomes uncertain whether he is writing about Ireland or America, looking out at the Atlantic or the Irish Sea—or both. Like Bishop who, in “Questions of Travel,” writes, “Think of the long trip home. / Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?”¹⁴⁶ Berryman often uses his travels to question his relation to the United States and “the world else peripheral” (DS 280). Commenting on “Questions of Travel,” Mark Ford has argued that it may be read as a record of a journey to France in 1937 and Bishop’s subsequent contemplation of that trip “as a way of discovering the fresh perspectives a foreign country inevitably forces on one’s cultural and linguistic assumptions.”¹⁴⁷ A similar point may be made with respect to Berryman: his engagements with Ireland and Europe enabled him to consider America “without America’s perpetual self-laud” as he puts it in Dream Song 280:

Decision taken, Henry'll be back abroad,
from where things look more inter'sting, where things
American are seen
without America's perpetual self-laud
as if everything in America had wings,
the world else a crawling scene,

the world else peripheral.

Berryman's exposition of American cultural superiority here summarises the critical project of *The Dream Songs* as a whole, which is to challenge all kinds of authority—but American authority in particular. The encounter with the “majestic Shade” in Dream Song 312 may be read as a central trope that summarises all figurations of authority in *The Dream Songs*. To insist that the “majestic Shade” *is* Yeats is to limit the figure's meaning to a range of biographical details: that Berryman began writing poetry, in his own words, “as a burning, trivial disciple of the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats” (FP 323), that he went to Dublin to visit Yeats in 1937 and returned there in 1966 to confront his ghost, and so on. Just as his consideration of what *should* be the Irish Sea in Dream Song 296 becomes a meditation on the Atlantic that divides the Old World from the New, so Berryman's engagement with the “majestic Shade” in Dream Song 312 involves a dialogue with both Yeats *and* the “shade cast / Across his country by the past” in “Heritage.”

Yeats is mentioned in no fewer than eleven Dream Songs, and he is alluded to in dozens more. Dream Song 312 is usually cited as the most significant example of Berryman's treatment of Yeats in *The Dream Songs*, in part because it coincides with his actual move to Dublin in 1966 but more importantly because it appears to represent the culmination of the dialogue between them. A number of Dream Songs that mention Yeats, however, were written much earlier: Dream Songs 88, 190, and 215, for example, were all written in 1964, when Berryman was still uncertain about the suitability of

Dublin for his year's leave. In Dream Song 88 ("Op. Post. no. 11"), Berryman remembers meeting Yeats in "the London spring half-spent" in 1937:

a seated ruin of a man
courteous to a junior, like one of the boarders,
or Dylan, with more to say
now there's no hurry, and we're all a clan.
You'd think off here one would be free from orders.
I didn't hear a single word. I obeyed.

As one of the "*Opus Posthumous*" Dream Songs, the place referred to in the phrase "off here" is the after-world, where Henry "in slack times visit[s] the violent dead / and pick[s] their awful brains." (DS 88) Even there, however, where Henry and Yeats are members of the same "clan," he must yield to some greater authority: "You'd think off here one would be free of orders."

In Dream Song 86 Berryman writes that, "Henry lies clear as any onion-peel / in any sandwich, say." Heterogeneous Henry, however, is *not* "clear as any onion-peel". Rather, "Henry House"—the protagonist of *The Dream Songs*—is a complex composite figure that cannot be reduced to the characteristics of "his" creator (Berryman himself), no more than "he" may be identified in terms of age, race, or gender. "Henry House" could be considered as a figure embodying what has been described as "the proliferation of details about the domestic space of the house", by Thomas Docherty in his study *On Modern Authority* (1987).¹⁴⁸ Docherty argues that "The house, of course, is also the family, and its organisation is identified in the 'proper' familial name."¹⁴⁹ In *The Dream Songs* Henry lacks a constant "'proper' familial name", but the surname "House" draws attention to Henry's ironic engagement with the traditional sources of authority described by Docherty, from the father to the president. As Docherty continues: "Such familial nomination is especially important, for the simple reason that it aligns itself with the historical certainties of primogenitive rights. These notions of primogeniture, assuring as they are of the myth of origins, are vital to the construction of the authority

model of the divine rights of popes, emperors, and kings.” The dialectic established between “Henry House” and the “majestic Shade” in *The Dream Songs* is one of Berryman’s most important figurations in the poem’s interrogation of authority. Narrow confessional readings of *The Dream Songs*, as outlined earlier, tend to reduce Henry’s engagement with the “majestic Shade” in *The Dream Songs* to a set of real-life (autobiographical) disclosures. The relationship between “Henry House” and the “majestic Shade” may be read in radically different terms, however, as a metaphor for Berryman’s interrogation of all forms of cultural and political authority in his most important long poem.



In a letter to Berryman written in 1963, Allen Tate joked that:

Dream Song 70015 is very fine. I saw *Ramparts* and they are splendid too. I hope you will write 100,000 Dream Songs, but damn it I hope you will also some day start writing something else. You don’t want to dream forever, do you? Don’t misunderstand me. I admire at least four out of five of the Dream Songs I’ve seen. I don’t like to think of you exclusively as the DREAM SONG MAN.¹⁵⁰

In this letter Tate expresses a reservation about *The Dream Songs* that many critics have articulated in the decades since Berryman’s death, during which time the rest of his work has been sidelined because of the sheer bulk of Berryman’s Dream Songs project. In a study of this length it is clearly impracticable to discuss all 385 Dream Songs included in *The Dream Songs*, as well as the forty-five included in *Henry’s Fate*, and the dozens of unpublished or uncollected (complete and incomplete) Dream Songs that remain largely unedited and unpublished among Berryman’s manuscripts. Even Haffenden’s *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (1980) provides annotations for only 107 of the 385 Dream Songs published in *77 Dream Songs* and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*. Instead of offering a revised commentary on *The Dream Songs*, and in an attempt to move away from the view that Berryman’s work is irreversibly introspective and self-centredly autobiographical in its interests, this chapter has focused on the more urgent task of re-

defining Berryman's critical engagement with various forms of cultural and political authority in a selection of published and unpublished Dream Songs. That task will be continued in the next chapter's description of Berryman's examinations of the self *in* society in *Love & Fame* (1970), *Delusions Etc.* (1972), and *Recovery* (1973).

Notes

¹ John Berryman, Dream Song fragment, Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 1, Folder 1, no. 60, John Berryman Papers (JBP). These two lines are hand-written on the second page of a draft for a Dream Song beginning with the line "I am ashamed to say 'I love my country'" dated "19 Aug [19]60."

² William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* II.ii.120-21, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 789-817; 798.

³ Al Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (1971; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974) 280.

⁴ Louise Glück, "Against Sincerity," *Proofs and Theories* (1994; Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1999) 33-45; 44.

⁵ Glück 44.

⁶ Alvarez, *The Savage God* 280

⁷ Peter Stitt, "The Art of Poetry," *Paris Review* 53 (Winter 1972): 177-207. Reprinted in Harry Thomas, ed. *Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988) 18-44; 21.

⁸ Elizabeth Bishop, 21 March 1972, *One Art*, ed. Robert Giroux (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994) 561-65.

⁹ Bishop, *One Art* 562.

¹⁰ M. L. Rosenthal, "Poetry as Confession," *The Nation* (19 September 1959): 154-55. Reprinted in Jonathan Price, ed. *Critics on Robert Lowell* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1974) 71-5; 71.

¹¹ Rosenthal 71, 74.

¹² Rosenthal 75.

¹³ M. L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) 25.

¹⁴ Harold Bloom, introduction, *John Berryman: Modern Critical Views* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989) 1-4; 1.

¹⁵ Gregory Orr, "The Postconfessional Lyric," *The Columbia Literary History of American Poetry*, eds. Jay Parini and Brett C. Millier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 650-73; 666-67.

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- ¹⁶ Bishop, *One Art* 561.
- ¹⁷ Stitt 22.
- ¹⁸ A. E. Housman, *The Poems of A. E. Housman*, ed. Archie Burnett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 65-66.
- ¹⁹ Philip Toynbee, "Berryman's Songs," *Encounter* 24 (March 1965): 76-8. Reprinted in Thomas 133-38; 135.
- ²⁰ William Wasserstrom, "Cagey John: Berryman as Medicine Man," *Centennial Review* (Summer 1968): 334-54. Reprinted in Thomas 167-85; 168.
- ²¹ Toynbee 136.
- ²² Toynbee 137.
- ²³ John Plotz *et al.*, "An Interview with John Berryman," *Harvard Advocate* 103.1 (Spring 1969): 4-9. Reprinted in Thomas 3-17; 11.
- ²⁴ Robert Bly, "A 'Garage Sale' of Berryman's Poetry," rev. of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, *Minneapolis Tribune* 13 Dec. 1970: 10E-11E.
- ²⁵ Marilyn S. Chiat, letter, *Minneapolis Tribune* 20 Dec. 1970: [n. pag.]. This letter was printed under the headline "Berryman, Bly Controversial." All quotations from the correspondence provoked by Bly's review in the *Minneapolis Tribune* are taken from copies held in the John Berryman Papers which were cut from the newspaper without page numbers.
- ²⁶ Keith Gunderson, letter, *Minneapolis Tribune* 27 Dec. 1970: [n. pag.]. This letter was printed under headline "Berryman's Poems Defended."
- ²⁷ Diane Wood Middlebrook, "What Was Confessional Poetry?" in Parini and Millier 632-49; 635.
- ²⁸ Toynbee 137.
- ²⁹ Helen Vendler, "John Berryman: Freudian Cartoons," *The Given and the Made: Recent American Poets* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995) 29-57; 57.
- ³⁰ Deborah Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) 152.
- ³¹ Madsen 154.
- ³² Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966; London: Vintage, 1996) 86.
- ³³ Pynchon 86.
- ³⁴ Paul Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry Since the Fifties* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 182.
- ³⁵ Breslin 183.
- ³⁶ Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1983) 5.
- ³⁷ Breslin 183.
- ³⁸ Robert Creeley, preface, *Selected Poems: Charles Olson*, ed. Robert Creeley (Berkeley and Oxford: University of California Press, 1993) xi-xx; xvi.

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- ³⁹ Peter Middleton, "Charles Olson: The Short History," *Parataxis: modernism and modern writing* 10 (2001): 54-66; 57.
- ⁴⁰ Olson, "On Poets and Poetry," *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1997) 253-255; 253.
- ⁴¹ Olson, *Collected Prose* 254.
- ⁴² Olson, *Selected Poems* 54-62.
- ⁴³ Olson, *The Maximus Poems* 612.
- ⁴⁴ Olson, *The Maximus Poems* 633.
- ⁴⁵ Olson, *Selected Poems* 5-12; 11.
- ⁴⁶ Joel Conarroe, *John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977) 147.
- ⁴⁷ Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory 1910-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) 166.
- ⁴⁸ Plotz *et al* 11.
- ⁴⁹ Marjorie Perloff, "Poètes Maudits of the Genteel Tradition: Berryman and Lowell," in *Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry*, eds. Stephen Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 99-116.
- ⁵⁰ Perloff 105.
- ⁵¹ Stephen Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 98.
- ⁵² Al Alvarez, *The New Poetry* (1962; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966) 21-32; 32.
- ⁵³ Alvarez, *The New Poetry* 28.
- ⁵⁴ Thomas Travisano, *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1999) 66.
- ⁵⁵ Travisano 32.
- ⁵⁶ Travisano 58.
- ⁵⁷ Allen Ginsberg, *Selected Poems 1947-1995* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996) 12-13.
- ⁵⁸ Travisano 53.
- ⁵⁹ J. M. Linebarger, *John Berryman* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974) 85, 139.
- ⁶⁰ Gary Q. Arpin, *The Poetry of John Berryman* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1978) 64.
- ⁶¹ John Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1980) 89.
- ⁶² Jacques Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, trans. E. de P. Matthews (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1945) 42. Emphasis in original.
- ⁶³ Al Alvarez, "Beyond All This Fiddle," *Times Literary Supplement* 23 Mar. 1967: 1-2.

⁶⁴ Alvarez interviewed Berryman in Dublin for the BBC in 1967. In his 1970 interview with Peter Stitt Berryman mentioned Alvarez with Frank Kermode as one of two English critics whose work he respected. See Stitt 21.

⁶⁵ Alvarez, "Beyond All This Fiddle" 2.

⁶⁶ Gottfried Benn, "Nachtcafé," trans. Michael Hamburger, in *Prose, Essays, Poems*, ed. Volkmar Sander (New York: Continuum, 1987) 188-189.

⁶⁷ Benn 189

⁶⁸ Karl Shapiro, foreword, *Letters of Delmore Schwartz*, ed. Robert Phillips (Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1984) xi.

⁶⁹ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979) 20.

⁷⁰ De Man 20-21.

⁷¹ Alan Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1984) 68.

⁷² Quoted by Michael Hamburger in "Gottfried Benn," Harold Bloom, ed. *Modern German Poetry* (New York: Chelsea House, 1989) 73-91; 91.

⁷³ Alvarez, *The Savage God* 291.

⁷⁴ Alvarez, *The Savage God* 281.

⁷⁵ Stitt 22-23.

⁷⁶ Stitt 23.

⁷⁷ Terence Brown, *The Life of W. B. Yeats: A Critical Biography* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999) 119.

⁷⁸ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (1955; London: Macmillan, 1991) 348-9.

⁷⁹ Barbara Wright has written that *Ubu Roi* "shamelessly displays what civilisation tries hard to hide" in her preface to Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi*, trans. Barbara Wright (1951; London: Gaberbocchus Press, 1966) xi.

⁸⁰ Sean Ryder, "Annotations to John Berryman's Dream Songs," diss., University College Dublin, 1989.

⁸¹ Ryder 21. Disagreeing with Kathe Davis Finney's view that the reader of *The Dream Songs* should "focus on the historical and biographical references 'only as they appear in the poems,'" Ryder argues that Finney's approach encourages a "forestalling [of] any serious kind of historicist or intertextual reading [of *The Dream Songs*]." He continues: "But it is precisely these kinds of readings which may prove the most interesting and vital for future readers of Berryman's Songs." See Kathe Davis Finney, "Obscurity in John Berryman's Dream Songs," diss., Brown University, 1977.

⁸² Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (1975; London: Marion Boyars, 1977).

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- ⁸³ See Stephen Matterson, "Tenth-Muse-ism, Or, The Discontinuity of American Poetry," *Living with America*, eds. Rob Kroes and Cristina Giorcelli (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1997) 267-73.
- ⁸⁴ Kenner xviii.
- ⁸⁵ Albert Gelpi, *The Tenth Muse: The Psyche of the American Poet* (1975; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) ix.
- ⁸⁶ Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961; Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987) 376.
- ⁸⁷ Lee M. Jenkins, "Wallace Stevens and America," *Locations of Literary Modernism: Region and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry*, eds. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 178-198; 198.
- ⁸⁸ Pearce 376.
- ⁸⁹ Theodore Roethke, *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975) 258.
- ⁹⁰ Berryman, 17 March 1944, in Richard J. Kelly, ed. *We Dream of Honour: John Berryman's Letters to His Mother* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1988) 207.
- ⁹¹ Berryman, 14 May 1950, in Kelly 234.
- ⁹² Helen Vendler, "The Hunting of Wallace Stevens: Critical Approaches," *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1988) 75-90; 76.
- ⁹³ Vendler, *The Music of What Happens* 77.
- ⁹⁴ Pearce 376.
- ⁹⁵ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (1955; London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984) 20.
- ⁹⁶ Pearce 376.
- ⁹⁷ Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* 83.
- ⁹⁸ Doreen Alvarez Saar, "J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur 1735-1813," in Paul Lauter et al., eds. *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 2nd ed. Vol. 2 (1990; Lexington and Toronto: D. C. Heath and Company, 1994) 819-20; 820.
- ⁹⁹ Alvarez Saar 820.
- ¹⁰⁰ See Appendix 1.
- ¹⁰¹ Berryman, ["*They say, The end crowns. I: 'Oh me alone'*"], Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, JBP.
- ¹⁰² Berryman, "Henry House," Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, JBP.
- ¹⁰³ Albert Gelpi, *A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910-1950* (1987; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 24.
- ¹⁰⁴ Gelpi 24.
- ¹⁰⁵ Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* 104.

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- ¹⁰⁶ Robert Frost, "On the Cold War," *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, eds. Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1995) 901.
- ¹⁰⁷ Gelpi 24.
- ¹⁰⁸ Cited in Henry Fairlie, *The Kennedy Promise: The Politics of Expectation* (New York: Doubleday, 1973) 109.
- ¹⁰⁹ Derval Tubridy, *Thomas Kinsella: The Peppercanister Poems* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2001) 47.
- ¹¹⁰ Richard Kostelanetz, "Conversation with Berryman," *The Massachusetts Review* 11.2 (Spring 1970): 340-347; 347.
- ¹¹¹ Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* 115.
- ¹¹² *A Coherent Splendor* 24.
- ¹¹³ Kostelanetz 344.
- ¹¹⁴ Berryman, ["I like my Scottish than my English blood"], Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, JBP.
- ¹¹⁵ Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1988) 143.
- ¹¹⁶ Nielsen 143.
- ¹¹⁷ See Appendix 1.
- ¹¹⁸ Berryman, ["Patriot Henry loved his country. Ay"], Unpublished Dream Songs, Box 2, JBP.
- ¹¹⁹ Nielsen 143.
- ¹²⁰ Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 164.
- ¹²¹ "Formal Elegy" has been neglected in all of the major accounts of Berryman's work published to date. For a more detailed analysis of the poem and the critical neglect that surrounds it see Philip Coleman, "'The Scene of Disorder': John Berryman's 'Formal Elegy,'" *Irish Journal of American Studies* 8 (May 2000): 201-23.
- ¹²² Erwin A. Glikes and Paul Schwaber, eds. *Of Poetry and Power: Poems Occasioned by the Presidency and Death of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Basic Books, 1964) 44-47.
- ¹²³ This copy of *Of Poetry and Power* is held in the John Berryman Collection in the Wilson Library, University of Minnesota.
- ¹²⁴ Berryman, ["I puff: away the smoke floats, here indoors:"], *Metre* 6 (Summer 1999) 8.
- ¹²⁵ "Verses for J. F. K.," *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 Dec. 1964: 1128.
- ¹²⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991) 355-56.
- ¹²⁷ Louis Zukofsky, "A" 15, in "A" (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984) 359-75; 364.

- ¹²⁸ Paul Mariani, *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman* 2nd ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996) 400.
- ¹²⁹ Walt Whitman, "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd." See Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose* ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: The Library of America, 1982) 459-67.
- ¹³⁰ W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, 2nd ed. (1991; London: Macmillan, 1993) 33-36; 36.
- ¹³¹ For a useful discussion of "Wash Far Away" see Lea Baechler, "A 'Deeper-Deepest-Acquaintance' with the Elegy: John Berryman and 'Wash Far Away,'" in Richard J. Kelly and Alan K. Lathrop, eds. *Recovering Berryman: Essays on a Poet* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993) 125-40.
- ¹³² John Milton, *Complete English Poems, Of Education, Areopagitica*, ed. Gordon Campbell (London: Everyman, 1990) 49-55.
- ¹³³ Randall Jarrell, "Good Fences Make Good Poets," rev. of *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrance Thompson, in *Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews, 1935-1964* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980) 365-68; 368.
- ¹³⁴ Jarrell 368.
- ¹³⁵ Jarrell 368.
- ¹³⁶ John Berryman, *Berryman's Shakespeare*, ed. John Haffenden (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999) 100-119; 101.
- ¹³⁷ See n1 above.
- ¹³⁸ Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* II.ii.113-126, in *The Oxford Shakespeare* 798.
- ¹³⁹ Berryman, ["I puff: away the smoke floats, here indoors:"], *Metre* 6 (Summer 1999) 8.
- ¹⁴⁰ John Montague, "Henry in Dublin," *The Figure in the Cave and other essays* ed. Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1989) 200-207; 203. For a more detailed account of Montague's account see Philip Coleman, "'What am I myself here doing?': Revisiting Henry in Dublin," *Thumbscrew* 15 (Winter-Spring 2000): 11-16.
- ¹⁴¹ Berryman, unpublished diary for 1963, JBP.
- ¹⁴² John Murphy, "John Ashbery: An Interview," *Poetry Review* 75.2 (August 1985): 20-25; 22.
- ¹⁴³ Kostelanetz 344.
- ¹⁴⁴ Roethke 193.
- ¹⁴⁵ Berryman, "Heritage," Unpublished Miscellaneous Poetry, Box 2, Folder 27, JBP. This poem is quoted in John Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* (1982; London: Ark Paperbacks, 1983) 107. See also *Thumbscrew* 15 (Winter-Spring 2000): 10.
- ¹⁴⁶ Elizabeth Bishop, *Complete Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991) 93-94.
- ¹⁴⁷ Mark Ford, "Mont D'Espoir or Mount Despair: Early Bishop, Early Ashbery, and the French," in *Poetry and the Sense of Panic: Critical Essays on Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery*, ed. Lionel Kelly (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000) 9-27; 22.

¹⁴⁸ Thomas Docherty, *On Modern Authority: The Theory and Condition of Writing: 1500 to the Present Day* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1987) 54.

¹⁴⁹ Docherty 54.

¹⁵⁰ Allen Tate, unpublished letter to John Berryman, 6 June 1963, Correspondence, Box 25, JBP.

CHAPTER 5

ON “NOT GIVING THE WHOLE THING UP”; OR, READING THROUGH *RECOVERY*:

RE-PLACING THE SELF IN *LOVE & FAME* AND *DELUSIONS, ETC.*, 1970-72

Fame is a form of incomprehension, perhaps the worst.

(Jorge Luis Borges)¹

In the final two years of his life John Berryman completed two collections of poems, *Love & Fame* and *Delusions, Etc.*, and brought close to completion the novel *Recovery* which was published posthumously in 1973. In a letter to Robert Giroux in May 1971 he described his “Present plan” as follows:

- 1) vol. Essays/stories—Spr. '72
- 2) *Delusions, Etc.*—Fall '72
- 3) *Recovery* (the novel)—'73?
- 4) *Shakespeare's Reality*—'74?
- 5) *The Blue Book of Poetry* (ed.)
- 6?) I am also doing a *Life of Christ*
for Martha [his daughter]:
illustrated—e.g. Titian's great
'Scourging' in the Pinakothek.

(FP viii)

Berryman's prolific output during this period is fascinating for a number of reasons, and not least because he spent a great deal of this time in hospital undergoing treatment for alcoholism as well as carrying out his duties as Regents' Professor at the University of Minnesota. It is interesting too because the reception of *The Dream Songs* had more or less decided Berryman's critical fate, as Robert Lowell implied when he wrote that the “last two books, *Love & Fame* and *Delusions, Etc.*, move,” but only insofar as “they fill out the frame [of *The Dream Songs*] and prepare for [Berryman's] death.”² By suggesting that *Love & Fame* and *Delusions, Etc.* “prepare” the reader for Berryman's death, Lowell's attitude to the later work encourages the view that these texts develop and augment the

narrow confessional interpretation of *The Dream Songs* as a work of autobiographical introspection, which was undermined in the preceding chapter's description of Berryman's expansive negotiations with cultural and political authority in the long poem. Emphasising the compositional interconnectedness of his later work, this chapter reads *Love & Fame, Delusions, Etc.* and *Recovery* in terms of Berryman's response to the critical reception of *The Dream Songs* by exploring the ways in which these texts re-place the self in society against the narrow confessional insistence that his work is invariably rooted in private concerns.

1. After *The Dream Songs*

In an essay on Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" published in 1966, Berryman describes that poem as both a meditation on "the insane nationalism and dreads of the nineteenth century" and "Thomas Hardy explicat." (FP 243) Although he felt that the latter reading of Hardy's poem was more compelling on that occasion, he did not deny the significance of the former, which indicates his awareness of the ideological work attempted, if not always accomplished, by poetry. In Berryman criticism, however, there has been an overwhelming tendency to read his work in rigidly autobiographical terms as a sustained poetic memoir ("John Berryman explicat"), without paying much attention to the poetry's engagement with a range of more worldly questions concerning history, ideology, and identity. Indeed, it is often the case that even when his work is read as an intransigently autobiographical body of writing, and subsequently criticised for what Marjorie Perloff has described as its "wry anecdotalism," critics fail to provide anything more than a very cursory analysis of Berryman's poetry, evidenced by Perloff's dismissal of the "reminiscence of Berryman's Oxford"³ when it is clear that Cambridge (albeit "The Other Cambridge") is the subject of Berryman's attention in *Love & Fame*. (CP 192-3)

When Berryman wrote in the posthumously published Dream Song “Henry’s Fate” that, “All projects failed, in the August afternoon / he lay & cursed himself & cursed his lot / like Housman’s lad forsooth” (HF 32), he was describing on one level his disappointment with the extraordinarily narrow focus of much contemporary critical engagement with his work. In November 1968, less than a week after the publication of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, he wrote another Dream Song (published posthumously) in which he explored the idea that the long poem he had just “completed” had in some way failed to express his “message”:

A man stood up from gross affliction, stood
trembling, in a marsh. Whither would he go?
The land-birds were clamorous.
He couldn’t read his maps. His staff of wood
sank in everywhere. He fancied on him below
were clustered the wraths of us.

And I won’t call him wrong. We hated him
for all that dismal & the tufts of spirit.
—Mr Bones, they repents.
Quiet you. —I am elected to create a hymn
in classical Chinese, which we inherit,
dense with abundant sense

to the few who for him were against the mob.
Hao I start, *jen* I continue. Cries
from terns & jays, midst papyri,
point out my message, which is my last job.
The world has ended, to no one’s surprise.
We won’t return him to I.

(HF 34)

The act of writing is figured as a journey here, and Berryman suggests that the decade-long labour of *The Dream Songs* brought him to “a marsh” where “His staff of wood / sank in everywhere.” Moreover, this Dream Song describes Berryman’s uneasy awareness of the attention that was being given to “the tufts of spirit” by critics determined to concentrate on the poem’s ostensibly autobiographical aspects. Interrogating the reasons for this critical attitude here, Berryman announces that he will

move on from *The Dream Songs* and “create a hymn” in which “We won’t return him to P”: in other words, he determines to produce a work that will address, if not counteract, the reductive critical strategies that were being brought to bear on the long poem.

Haffenden has argued that Berryman “needed to withdraw from his persona after the completion of *The Dream Songs*, that ultimately Henry could not personate the wholeness of being human, and that from then on (as in *Love & Fame*) he needed to face the moral responsibility of his life without intermediary”⁴. This claim emphasises the way that Berryman’s writing after *The Dream Songs* enacts a series of radical self-disclosures but it also suggests that the work post-Henry, as it were, takes the issue of “moral responsibility” as a more immediately pressing concern than it might have appeared in the long poem. The interwoven issues of moral, social, and political responsibility are addressed and explored in many important Dream Songs, in which the disaffected and displaced figure of Henry House confronts the crises of the self in a Cold War world where “Incredible panic rules” as Berryman writes in Dream Song 46. In other words, *The Dream Songs* can be read as an examination of the problematic relationship between self and society that develops the general understanding of poetry’s function in addressing issues of moral and political responsibility at a time when, as Lowell remarked in 1967, “It is almost impossible, even where this is permitted, to be directly political and remain inspired.”⁵ The poetry after *The Dream Songs* may appear to be more nakedly autobiographical than even the most spectacularly candid Dream Songs, but on another level this apparent candour may be read as a move towards a closer negotiation of the interface between self and society in Berryman’s writing, which is reinforced by Gary Q. Arpin’s claim that “the delusions [in the title of *Delusions, Etc.*] are not Berryman’s alone. The chief delusion is man’s thinking—the pride he takes in his rational facilities.”⁶

Haffenden has argued that in 1971 “Berryman injected into his work fundamental elements of political and social consciousness. He determined to leap beyond what all too often seemed to be a customary egotism.”⁷ That Berryman had to make a concerted effort to take this “leap” signals his frustration with the narrow confessional focus of many contemporary critical responses to his work, which failed to appreciate its engagements with American culture and society. In the posthumously published *Dream Song* beginning “I’m reading my book backward” (HF 46) Berryman writes of *The Dream Songs* that:

There’s madness in the book. And sanenesses,
he argued. Ha! It’s all a matter of
control (& so forth) of the subject.
The subject? Henry House & his troubles, yes
with his wife & mother & baby, yes
we’re now at the end, enough.

A human personality, that’s impossible.
The lines of nature & of will, that’s impossible.
I give the whole thing up.
Only there resides a living voice
which if we can make we make it out of choice
not giving the whole thing up.

The trite summary of his long poem’s “subject” in terms of “Henry House & his troubles,” where those “troubles” are described exclusively as marital and domestic concerns, may be read as a deliberately self-conscious undermining of the broader critical project engaged by *The Dream Songs*. Berryman seems to resign himself to the inevitability of the fact (“yes / [...] yes”) that the poem’s descriptions of “madness” and marital or domestic crisis will always provoke more (voyeuristic) critical interest than its arguments or “sanenesses”. For this reason he considers “giving the whole thing up.”

Berryman did not “give the whole thing up”, however, and the critical engagements with American culture and society that were either overlooked or undervalued in the critical reception of *The Dream Songs* may be traced into *Love & Fame*, *Delusions, Etc.* and *Recovery*. There is a considerable amount of overlap between these

three works in terms of the chronological proximity of their composition, but also in terms of the way that they each seek to negotiate Berryman's position on the relationship between self and society to an audience that had come to view him largely as a poet of introspective disengagement. In an article entitled "Balling the Muse," originally published in the *North American Review* and subsequently included in his book-length study of confessional poetry under the chapter-title "John Berryman's Literary Offenses," Robert Phillips argues that:

Rather than displaying moral courage, these poems [of *Love & Fame*] display instead immoral callowness. In place of love and fame, we have lust and notoriety.

These tendencies were present in *The Dream Songs*, of course, but were held in check by Berryman's use of the Henry *persona*. When in *Love & Fame* he abandons altogether the third-person singular fiction, he gifts us only with unprecedented breast-beating. The Dream Songs are [sic] motivated by the ego; *Love & Fame* is sheer vanity.⁸

Phillips' dismissal of Berryman's work, and of *Love & Fame* and *Delusions, Etc.* in particular, is based on an assumption of wilful solipsism and self-indulgence that has been reiterated by several scholars and commentators, including Hayden Carruth and Perloff. This general position supports a covert abandonment of Berryman's last works, and the idea that at this point (i.e. after considering *The Dream Songs*) the critic should, to use Berryman's phrase, "give the whole thing up."

In the posthumously published Dream Song quoted above ("I am reading my book backward"), Berryman writes that: "Only there resides a living voice / which if we can make we make it out of choice / not giving the whole thing up." Over and against an interpretation of these lines as an avowal of the autobiographical impulse, where "the living voice" is little more than a figure of egoistic self-disclosure, however, is the expression of a fundamental belief in the agency of poetry which, in the case of Berryman's work, was rarely credited in his own lifetime. Donald Davie suggested as much in 1976 when he described Berryman as "one of the most honorable and

responsible” American poets of his generation, and lamented the fact that he had not been acknowledged as such when he was alive.⁹ In June 1971 Berryman started a poem he described as his “3rd epic,” to be called *The Children*, which begins with a description of a decidedly worldly poetic project:

So screw you, Muses, for I have hard in my mind
a christian [sic] thing & psychosocial nuclear
environmental awful & deluded thing
—deluded by beyond ‘Yea, yea,’ ‘Nay, nay’—
I doubt you’d even credit anyone
could credit, far less buy.

(HF 80)

In the course of the sections that follow, it will be shown that Berryman’s concerns in *Love & Fame*, *Delusions*, *Etc.*, and *Recovery* involve a similarly intense engagement with things “christian & psychosocial nuclear / environmental awful & deluded”, beginning with a reappraisal of *Recovery* and its critique of what Berryman termed American “hyperdemocracy” (R 66).

2. Reading through *Recovery*

(i)

Berryman began writing *Recovery* in December 1970, shortly after the publication of *Love & Fame* which prompted Hayden Carruth to suggest that, “The time has come, surely, to say that Berryman’s poetry is usually interesting and sometimes witty but almost never moving, and that in spite of its scope and magnitude it lacks the importance that has been ascribed to it in recent years by many critics, editors, and readers.”¹⁰ Berryman was deeply wounded by Carruth’s criticism, not only because it doubted the importance of *Love & Fame* but it also questioned the critical canonisation of his earlier works, and *The Dream Songs* in particular, by describing his entire project as a form of “self-advertising” which in *Love & Fame* had become (in Carruth’s view) “vain and outrageous.”¹¹ Despite

his attempts to heighten the sense of critical engagement in his work after the failure of *The Dream Songs* to inspire anything more than narrow confessional readings, *Love & Fame* was greeted by an extremely negative review that set the tone for subsequent criticism of Berryman's later work for its apparent neglect of the public sphere and what was described as its author's incurable vanity and self-pity. Although *Recovery* takes its title from the therapeutic process involved in trying to recover one's physical, emotional, and intellectual powers after succumbing to alcoholic addiction, then, it might also be read as a term that describes Berryman's attempts to redeem or *recover* his work from the critical condemnations of Carruth and others who had come to view the author of *The Dream Songs* as "egocentric, self-indulgent and obscurantist."¹² As Alan J. Altimont has argued, "writing is so often at issue in this novel that the hero seems to be in treatment for a *writing* problem as much as for a drinking problem, a parallel which should come as no surprise given how often Berryman mixed the two in life."¹³

Altimont's recognition of the centrality of writing in *Recovery* is pertinent, but he fails to appreciate its importance as a way of moving the discussion beyond the narrow confessional frame of reference. Described by Haffenden as a "strictly autobiographical work,"¹⁴ *Recovery* nonetheless embodies an important centrifugal critical dimension, and its "macrocosmic implications"¹⁵ in particular signal Berryman's attempts to create a text that would counteract the perceptions of confined confessional centripetality for which his work was being so harshly condemned during this period of his career. Writing in 1993, Roger Forseth argued that, "*Recovery* has not so far received anything like the critical attention it deserves independent of its apparently accepted status as a refined diary."¹⁶ Describing the novel as "more than a private journal reformatted into chapters with the names changed to protect the innocent", Forseth's reading admonishes the critical concentration on the "powerful autobiographical elements" of *Recovery* because of the way that it distracts from any further consideration of it in theoretical or historical

terms, so much so that he is tempted to employ “the old strictures of the New Critics regarding the biographical fallacy” in order to get away from the idea that the novel represents little more than a thinly disguised version of Berryman’s diary.¹⁷

Without resorting to New Critical strategies to avoid reading the novel as autobiography, however, *Recovery* may be read in the opposite direction as a text that says a great deal about the social, cultural, and political life of America in 1971. Moreover, the disease that afflicts the protagonist Alan Severance and his fellow sufferers at the treatment centre described in *Recovery* is in some sense caused by their pursuit of what the narrator terms “A new American Dream”—“the old one, Getting On and Doing Good, having turned into The American Nightmare”. (R 158) Rather than reading *Recovery* as a text that is centrally concerned with detailing the psycho-emotional turmoil caused by alcoholism, its often graphic depictions of disease can be read as elements of an allegorical narrative that plays with the idea of the correspondence between body politic and microcosm,¹⁸ engaged also in *Berryman’s Sonnets* and *The Dream Songs*. As Berryman puts it in the notes detailing “Severance’s re-socialization” that are included in the text of *Recovery*: “The body politic itself is a victim of disease, producing sincere delusions—that is, lies, which the liar believes.” (R 235) Cardinal among those “delusions” is the idea (or ideology) of American “hyperdemocracy,” mentioned by Severance on two occasions in *Recovery*, and defined on the first as “the sovereignty of the unqualified individual, added into a mass.” (R 66)

Severance’s perhaps unacceptable intellectual elitism may be regarded as an aspect of the erudition and scholarly attitude that so frequently causes him trouble in the course of the novel, and especially in group-therapy, as in the scene where he is told by a fellow-patient that, “You’re so superior you make me sick. You think we’re all just zeroes.” (R 128) Severance refuses to admit defeat or take a more modest stance and while he admits that “He was guilty all right” Berryman adds “even more, he was

innocent.” (R 129) How can Severance be both guilty and innocent at the same time? The answer may be that while he is guilty of intellectual superiority he cannot be blamed for refusing to assume a passive role in the hyperdemocratic “mass.” Severance, in other words, refuses to become a sheepish member of what he perceives to be the unthinking multitude that constitutes what Philip Roth has described as “the [American] tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral *we* with its insidious *E pluribus unum*.”¹⁹ If *Recovery* is an incomplete narrative of an individual’s attempts to overcome alcoholism, on another level it is an account of the social environment that played no small part in causing the subject’s illness in the first place. Alcoholism cannot be reduced to *either* psycho-emotional *or* environmental causes but it is what Berryman describes as a “bio-psycho-social-spiritual disease.” (R 212) Most criticism of the novel, as Forseth shows, has ignored the possibility that it may be read as a critical pathology of the social (as well as the psycho-emotional) aspects of the disease.

The correspondence between the diseased body and the corrupt body politic is registered by Severance’s descriptions of loss of control when seriously intoxicated: “Hallucination once, DT’s once (six hours). I had an involuntary bowel movement in my clothes, in a corridor of a public building; got home unnoticed.” (R 171) That Severance “got home unnoticed” from a “public building” is another aspect of what Philip McGowan has described as the “(non-)identity” or “invisibility” of the alcohol dependent in American society, which has historically refused to recognise the alcoholic as part of its erasure of the problematic citizen’s identity.²⁰ Severance’s drinking problem is also society’s problem, and the difficulty he has in admitting to his addiction is paralleled by the social erasure of the alcohol dependent’s identity. That Berryman intended to stress this relationship between Severance’s personal breakdown and disease and a broader social or public malaise is indicated by a number of elements in *Recovery*

that invite interpretations of it as an allegorical text. The name of the novel's protagonist, for example, is replete with allegorical possibility, as Charles Thornbury suggests in his introduction to Berryman's *Collected Poems 1937-1971*: "Alan [...] is Celtic for 'harmony' and Severance means 'tearer-apart of people, disrupter.'" (CP xxiii) Indeed, many of the other characters in the novel have names that indicate the text's allegorical dimension, such as the counsellors (recovering alcoholics themselves) Vin and Keg, and Severance's wife Ruth, named after the Biblical character and otherwise recurring figure in Berryman's career-long interrogation of the nature of displacement in the modern world.

As a "tearer-apart of people" Severance finds group-therapy difficult because he is unwilling to become a member of what he believes is an analogue of American "hyperdemocracy." Berryman described this as "the advanced heterogeneous democratic society" of the United States in his 1945 short story "The Imaginary Jew" (FP 360), which was published with *Recovery* in 1973. (R 243-52) Berryman refers to "The Imaginary Jew" in his notes to the novel and his publishers rightly felt that it "affords some insights into [Berryman's] techniques and concerns". (R 229) On the cover of the folder containing his notes for *Recovery* Berryman wrote that: "He was an inveterate note-taker. / note-maker, self-analyser. / For once the vice would serve a purpose." (R 229) In other words, he believed that his self-analysis and record of group-therapy could be of some greater significance. The "purpose" of that record may be understood in terms of the insight that *Recovery* gives to the life of an alcoholic but it is also presented by Berryman in a manner that enables the physical and emotional deterioration of Alan Severance (as opposed to John Berryman) to be viewed as stages in the disintegration of modern American society, which Severance holds is barely presentable to future generations: "Somewhere down in his left jaw Severance hurt, behind his eyes bitterness accumulated, he didn't feel good about the world they'd

presented to the kids.” (R 148) The world Berryman describes in *Recovery* is the same world of “Incredible panic” presented in *The Dream Songs*, the hostile and nightmarish American “Eden” of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, and it is revisited in many of the poems of *Love & Fame* and *Delusions, Etc.*

(ii)

The opening-up of the world in *Recovery* and the possibility of reading it as a political or social allegory is further indicated by Berryman’s choice of epigraph for chapter IV of the novel (“The Last Two First Steps,” R 100-74) which is taken from the opening of the fourth section of William Blake’s poem *The Book of Thel*. Chosen on the one hand for the puns on “porter” and “bar” in the first line, the epigraph ushers in one of the most difficult sections of the novel, where “the big tests” (R 101) await Severance. In *Recovery* Berryman gives the following two lines from *The Book of Thel*: “The eternal gates’ terrific porter lifted the northern bar; / Thel enter’d in & saw the secrets of the land unknown:” (R 99). Blake’s text continues:

She saw the couches of the dead, & where the fibrous roots
Of every heart on earth infixes deep its restless twists:
A land of sorrows & of tears where never smile was seen.²¹

The Book of Thel is on one level a poem about a young woman (Thel) confronting the world as she comes to maturity, but Blake’s text also “invite[s] the reader to seek out an allegorical explanation of Thel and her adventures”²², in the same way that the narrative of Alan Severance’s illness and struggle with sobriety may be considered as part of a greater (allegorical) social journey and critique. The “land of sorrows & of tears where never smile was seen” described in *The Book of Thel* is reminiscent of the world of hardship and loss described in Blake’s *Songs of Experience*: the “Marks of weakness, marks of woe” of “London,” the “winter and night in disguise” of “Nurse’s Song,” and “The invisible worm / That flies in the night” of “The Sick Rose.”²³ For Blake, and Berryman,

the world is dominated by forces of corruption and change, and it is from this world that Alan Severance seeks solace in drink.

The “secrets of the land unknown” mentioned in the second line of the fourth section of *The Book of Thel* are in fact described when Thel (entering maturity after an idyllic period of innocence in “the vales of Har”) sees “the couches of the dead” and “wander[s] in the land of clouds thro’ valleys dark” further on in Blake’s poem.²⁴ Unable to deal with the harsh realities of the world, the virginal Thel attempts to return to “the peaceful valley” of her youth rather than confront the brutal world of adult responsibility: “The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek / Fled back unhindered till she came into the vales of Har.”²⁵ In “The Last Two First Steps” Severance faces both his own past *and* what he describes as “all this horror here and in Asia, and our causing it”. (R 121) There is no “unhindered” possibility of avoiding the reality of the world for Severance as there is for Blake’s Thel; there is no choice but to confront it because one is essentially *enslaved* by it, as Berryman writes in his draft-notes for the novel:

There is no such thing as Freedom (though it is the most important condition of human life, after Humility,—which does not exist either). There is only Slavery (walls around one) and absence-of-Slavery (ability to walk in any direction, or to remain still).

Slavery is man’s condition (the Adam-fall story is right, which required man to walk out of happiness, equipped with his evidently running self-will). But it is undesirable. (Why? because it makes me unhappy—unlike the rest of natural existence, stones, stars, flowers, animals, lightning, waterfalls, etc.) How then to escape? (Is escape possible? yes, because some men have.)

(R 232)

This vision of enslavement posits a theory of human reality that insists upon the incorrigible facticity of existence.²⁶ Berryman maintains, however, that “escape” or transcendence *is* possible through faith, which is itself grounded in a “commitment” to life (and all that Thel flees from in Blake’s poem): “Life lies open before us, with commitment, its interesting and difficult (but He will guide us) choices, its sweet rewards,

its delightful (for we will have become so weary) end: immortal rest.” (R 232) The important conjunction of faith and commitment described here is explored by Berryman in more detail in the poems of *Love & Fame* and *Delusions, Etc.*

The passage just cited indicates the extent to which Berryman was attempting to present Severance as a character who moves through the process of “recovery” from relentless self-analysis to an intense interrogation of the contemporary American scene and “human affairs” in general, which he (Severance) believed were in a poor state: “What he did not buy was any regular attention to human affairs on the part of His Majesty. Screw that. Because look at them.” (R 233) In one of the most important scenes in *Recovery* Severance describes a dream that is, as David Kalstone has remarked, “at the heart of the novel”²⁷. In his dream Severance leaves the hospital and goes to a theatre where people are waiting for a German film to begin. A one-eyed girl leads him to his office and as they start to make love he realises that there is a boy in another bed in the same room. Severance wakes from his dream as he is about to reach for the girl. When Severance recollects his dream in group-therapy, one of the counsellors asks him to concentrate on the figure of the theatre itself, and to try to “*be* the amphitheatre”:

‘*Be* the amphitheatre,’ Severance said baffled. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Would you like to try?’ Linc’s voice was not casual at all. It had assumed the tone of intimate command Severance was very familiar with, used to others. He felt pressure.

‘All right,’ he said doubtfully.

‘Go ahead.’

He closed his eyes, and in five or six seconds, to his speechless surprise and unsurprise, he felt exactly like an amphitheatre. To show the group just where he stood, he raised his arms to shoulder level, stretching them out ahead of him, wrists and arms curved inward, and became immobile.

He heard Linc’s voice say, ‘Are you the amphitheatre?’

‘Yes,’ he said with decision.

‘How do you feel, Amphitheatre?’

He reflected. ‘Fine!’

(R 90)

It is significant that this scene takes place towards the end of chapter III, *before* Severance attempts to take “The Last Two First Steps” described in the next chapter bearing an epigraph taken from *The Book of Thel*, a text which is centrally concerned with exploring the inevitability of the self’s confrontation with reality. By becoming—or attempting to become—the amphitheatre, Severance not only takes an important step in the process of alcoholic recovery, but he also imagines a re-engagement with social affairs (represented by the public space of the amphitheatre) that were in some degree responsible for his collapse into alcoholic self-absorption.

Severance experiences extreme self-doubt in the days following his revelation of the dream in group-therapy, but his attempts at denying the importance of “becoming the amphitheatre” may be understood in terms of Thel’s flight from “the secrets of the land unknown” in Blake’s poem. In *Recovery* Berryman admits that life would be easier if one could simply switch off from the harsh realities and responsibilities of the world but, as he put it in a letter to the editor of *The New York Times* in April 1971 (at the height of the Vietnam War) which is also included in *Recovery*: “So no American is off any hook, fellow-actors. The hook is thick and dug deep. [...] We are obliged to hold ourselves responsible not only for a decade of Asiatic corpses and uninhabitable countryside and genocidal ‘resettlement’ of whole populations of Asiatic villagers, but for what we are doing to the survivors”. (R 236-7) In *Recovery* Severance’s responsibility as a scholar and teacher to educate his students against the ideology of “hyperdemocracy” and the arrogance of an American nation that ignores the serious problems abroad *and* on its own doorstep are examined. Berryman suggests that no-one can escape some portion of the blame for the fact that in a wealthy first-world nation “thirty million Americans are right this bright Spring morning slowly starving”, as he puts it the final damning sentence of his (unprinted) letter to *The New York Times*. (R 237)

(iii)

Recovery is less concerned with portraying an autobiographical portrait of John Berryman's alcoholism than it is with providing an allegorical sketch of one man's journey into an awareness of his responsibility to the world of social and political affairs, "the 'real world, people, events, history in short'."²⁸ Given its American context, the references to "The American Nightmare" (R 158) and "the body politic itself [as] a victim of disease" (R 235), it is clear that the world engaged by Berryman in *Recovery* is the United States of the Vietnam War era. Berryman began writing "a book on alcoholic treatment" in December 1970 and this turned into the unfinished novel that became known as *Recovery* during the summer of 1971. He began writing the novel at a time in his career when critics such as Carruth were calling for a reassessment of the value of his work, and when the poet himself was questioning the possibility that he had, as some critics were saying, "undervalued the societal" in his work up to this point.²⁹ Although it was not published until after Berryman's death, *Recovery* attempts to redress the critical dismissal of his late work, and the failure to appreciate the public engagements of *Love & Fame* in particular, by presenting a character's development from egoistic self-analysis to a sense of intense social and political responsibility and awareness.

Berryman stopped working on *Recovery* in December 1971 only a few weeks before his death. Nevertheless, he left extensive notes from which the overall design of the text may be understood. It is particularly interesting, for example, that the published version of *Recovery* begins and ends with sections labelled "*Higgaion*" and "*Selah*," which are the terms given to the traditional opening and closing sections of verses in the Psalms of David.³⁰ In notes to the novel drafted in September 1971, however, Berryman reversed the traditional placing of the "*Higgaion*" and "*Selah*" and decided to put the latter (which may be translated as "refrain") at the beginning of *Recovery*. (R 230) Søren Kierkegaard carries out a similar reversal of "*Higgaion*" and "*Selah*" in his work *Either/Or*.

Berryman's placing of the "*Selab*" at the beginning of a text that is concerned with examining the importance of ethical responsibility may then be regarded as a complex structural allusion to Kierkegaard's work. Kierkegaard's "*Selab*" (although he uses the Greek plural form, "ΔΙΑΨΑΛΜΑΤΑ" or "*diapsalmata*"), begins with a consideration of the question "What is a poet?":

What is a poet? An unhappy man who hides deep anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so formed that when the sigh and cry pass through them, it sounds like lovely music. His fate is like that of those unfortunates who were slowly tortured by a gentle fire in Phalaris's bull; their cries could not reach the tyrant's ears to cause him dismay, to him they sounded like sweet music. And people flock around the poet and say: "Sing again soon"—that is, "May new sufferings torment your soul but your lips be fashioned as before, for the cry would only frighten us, but the music, that is blissful." And the critics come forward and say: "That's the way, that's how the rules of aesthetics say it should be done." Of course, a critic resembles a poet to a hair, except he has no anguish in his heart, no music on his lips. So I tell you, I would rather be a swineherd at Amagerbo and be understood by the swine than a poet and misunderstood by people.³¹

Kierkegaard's understanding of poetic reception is pertinent to an appraisal of Berryman's reaction to the broadly negative critical response to *Love & Fame*. Considering *Recovery* in terms of his reaction to the claim that his work is self-centred and egoistic, it is clear that Berryman's mapping of Severance's movement into a heightened sense of social and moral responsibility is an elaboration of the same journey of the self described in *Love & Fame*—which was ignored in contemporary evaluations. More importantly, *Recovery* describes the crises attendant on the self *in* society in the same way that *Either/Or* explores the choice each individual must make between extremes of self-centred hedonism and moral responsibility, a choice that Berryman explores as a consequence of modern living in *Love & Fame*.

One of Berryman's reasons for writing *Recovery* was to redress the critical view, spearheaded by Carruth, that *Love & Fame* is essentially an egocentric account of the poet himself that has little value beyond the realm of author-centred autobiography. Although Berryman, in an interview with Peter Stitt in July 1970, could say that the subject of the

first poem of *Love & Fame* (“Her & It,” CP 169) was “solely and simply myself. Nothing else. A subject on which I am expert. Nobody can contradict me”, he subsequently described that remark as a “Delusion” in March 1971, before the interview was published.³² Berryman’s original remark was made with respect to one poem, “Her & It,” so there is no reason that it should hold for all of the poems in *Love & Fame*. More significant, however, is the reversal of the claim that “nobody can contradict” what might appear to be a straightforward autobiographical account, when Berryman labelled this remark as a delusion. Later in the same interview he says that “the subject on which I am a real authority is me,”³³ but Berryman undermined his own (autobiographical) authority by granting the possibility of second- or third-party contradiction. Indeed, the poems of *Love & Fame* are pervaded by a sense of uncertainty and doubt about the events of the past—“She muttered something in my ear I’ve forgotten as we danced”; “wishing I could lay my old hands somewhere on those snapshots.” (CP 169, 175) Rather than collapsing the events described in *Love & Fame* onto a rigid narrative framework of autobiographical confession, then, it is possible to read the book as an examination of the limitations of that paradigm, and as a meditation on the Kierkegaardian dilemma that the self must confront in his/her daily negotiations of social and moral responsibility. In *Recovery* Berryman invites the reader to re-read his work *against* the limitations of autobiographical confessionalism and to re-place the figure Carruth and others insist is the poet himself—the egocentric and self-obsessed author-protagonist of *Love & Fame*—within the broader social and political world of human affairs.

3. *Love & Fame and the Self in Society*

(i)

Allen Ginsberg makes an interesting allusion to Berryman's *Love & Fame* in the title of his last book *Death & Fame* (1999). In the closing lines of the book's title-poem Ginsberg reflects on the (auto)biographical fallacy that the past can be captured in its entirety: "Everyone knew they were part of 'History' except the deceased / who never knew exactly what was happening even when I was alive"³⁴. The absence of a final period in Ginsberg's otherwise heavily punctuated poem signifies a lack of closure that destabilises the authority of the reflective "I" frequently reduced to the figure of the poet himself, "known" so well by "Super-fans, poetasters, aging Beatniks & Deadheads, autograph-hunters, distinguished paparazzi, intelligent gawkers"³⁵. By parodying the reader's misguided sense of identity with his own historical personality, Ginsberg questions what Paul de Man has described as the confessional paradigm's emphasis on an assumed intimacy (or empathy) between the poet and his/her reader.³⁶

Then highschool teachers, lonely Irish librarians, delicate bibliophiles, sex
liberation troops nay armies, ladies of either sex
"I met him dozens of times he never remembered my name I loved him anyway,
true artist"
"Nervous breakdown after menopause, his poetry humor saved me from suicide
hospitals"
.....
"Kaddish made me weep for myself & father alive in Nevada City"
"Father Death comforted me when my sister died in Boston 1982"
"I read what he said in a newsmagazine, blew my mind, realized others like me
out there"
Deaf & Dumb bards with hand signing quick electric gestures³⁷

Ginsberg's "hand signing quick electric gestures" represents the signatures of writers who are themselves "Deaf & Dumb": their texts speak for them. The figure of the poet, however, and the events of his/her life are (in Berryman's phrase) "occluded & lost" (*CP* 201), caught up in the complex narrative multiplicity of "History."

Ginsberg's allusion to *Love & Fame* is made all the more significant by the fact that he is quoted in the second poem of Berryman's book, "Cadenza on Garnette." (CP 169-70) This poem problematizes the suggestion of candour conveyed by the book's opening poem "Her & It" (CP 169) and begins by invoking Wordsworth:

'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 169-70)

Reflecting on the "plain-saying" style that he utilised in many of the poems of *Love & Fame*, in "Cadenza on Garnette" Berryman considers the idea that "simple" language is somehow *less* amenable to multiple interpretations, and he plays the extreme views of Wordsworth and Ginsberg against each other before finding that he cannot wholly agree with either of them. Having cited Wordsworth's unwillingness to "[say] out passions as they were," Berryman continues:

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,
to squirrel together inklings as to Garnette,
any, no matter what, she did, said, was.

O it flowed fuller than the girl herself,
I feasted on Louise.
I all but fell in love with her instead,
so rich with news.

(CP 170)

What the speaker of the poem and its heroine do "in blunt view of whoever might pass by" is not seen by the reader. The reader may imagine what they got up to, of course, but—like the young lovers—the physical details remain "each other's wonders." These three stanzas may appear to "[say] out passions as they were" but they impart very

little information by which an individual might be either identified or scandalised.

Contrary to what the poem promises, it is *not* “rich with news.”

In the fifth stanza of “Cadenza on Garnette” Berryman quotes Ginsberg, with whom he participated at an international poetry festival in Spoleto, Italy, in 1967:

Allen long after, being taxed obscenely
in a news-sheet of Spoleto, international town,
complained to me next day: His aim was tell it all.
Poets! . . . Lovers & secrets!

(CP 170)

Berryman, however, does not “tell it all” in this poem, nor does he do so in *Love & Fame* more generally. Moreover, he admits in “Cadenza on Garnette” that he *cannot* “tell it all” (a position that Ginsberg was forced to acknowledge in his own last poems, and in “Death & Fame” in particular). The historical or biographical veracity of the events scarcely described in “Cadenza on Garnette” is undermined in the poem’s final two stanzas where the speaker admits that he is “puzzled” by the events of three decades earlier and recalls only generalities, “travelling spotlights” and an “orchestra gay”:

How did we break off, now I come to it,
I puzzle. Did she date somebody else
& I warred with that & she snapped ‘You don’t own me’
or did the flare just little by little fall?

so that I cut in & was cut in on,
the travelling spotlights coloured, the orchestra gay,
without emphasis finally,
pressing each other’s hand as he took over.

(CP 170)

The exposition of “Lovers & secrets” that Ginsberg encouraged does not happen in *Love & Fame*: “plain-saying” does not guarantee uninhibited candour.

Memory is a more important factor, and in the four parts of *Love & Fame* Berryman maps a subject’s movement from an obsession with the events of the past through to a realisation that it is irretrievable and an engagement with (and commitment

to) the realities of the present and the here-and-now. In his *Paris Review* interview Berryman said that *Love & Fame* “resemble[s] a long poem”³⁸ and, indeed, the book is more linear in its development than *The Dream Songs*. In Part I of *Love & Fame* Berryman describes a speaker who is, as he puts it in the “Scholia” to the second edition, a “distasteful Braggart”. (CP 290) That figure, however, can only remember very vague details about the amorous adventures of his past and by the end of Part I, in the poem “Recovery,” he admits of his intense coming-of-age that:

I don't know what the hell happened all that summer.
I was done in, mentally. I wrote nothing, I read nothing.
I spent a pot of money, not being used to money,
I forget on what, now. I felt dazed.

(CP 187)

The emphasis on *not* knowing and not being able to remember dominates what otherwise amounts to a very scrappy account of his youthful encounters with a relatively small group of women—Shirley, Garnette, Louise, Elspeth, and Charlotte. What are often rejected as Berryman's outrageous autobiographical confessions are reduced to a handful of extremely vague anecdotes by the end of Part I of *Love & Fame*, tending very quickly towards the “nothingness” of the last line of Keats's sonnet “When I have fears,” alluded to in the book's title, “Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.”³⁹

In the “Scholia” to the second edition of *Love & Fame* Berryman wrote that:

The initial American public reception of this book, whether hostile, cool, or hot, was so uncomprehending that I wondered whether I had wasted my time, until a letter came from Stanford seeing that it is—however uneven—a whole, each of the four movements criticizing backward the preceding, until Part IV wipes out altogether all earlier representations of the ‘love’ and ‘fame’ of the ironic title.

(CP 290)

Reiterating the idea that the book should be read as a “whole” (if not a whole poem) here, Berryman's claim regarding its “ironic title” is significant. Indeed, Berryman's use of irony in *Love & Fame* is developed in *Recovery* in his creation of the “disrupter” and

“tearer-apart of people” Alan Seeverance. Moreover, the broad Kierkegaardian structure of the novel—which was written in part as a response to the “uncomprehending” reception of *Love & Fame*—may be applied to *Love & Fame* also. In Parts I and II the speaker’s amorous adventures and his youthful desire for fame are sketched out, but in Parts III and IV a more socially aware figure comes into focus, culminating in the second of the “Eleven Addresses to the Lord” (in Part IV) with an appraisal of the necessity of faith in “a damned strange world” where “Man is ruining the pleasant earth & man.” (CP 216) Contrary to the opinion expressed by critics such as Carruth and Phillips, who castigated Berryman for the “literary offenses” committed in *Love & Fame*, and Jonathan Galassi’s extreme view that it “is devoted like all Berryman’s last work to the phantasies or delusions which dominated the poet’s life”⁴⁰, the book describes a self struggling with the pervasive uncertainties of modern life. Its overall design strives to convey the “Sense of a selfless seeker in this world” as Berryman writes in “In & Out.” (CP 182)

(ii)

Berryman invited his readers to consider the retrospective ironic structure of *Love & Fame*, and in the “Scholia” to the second edition, having offered a reading of the book’s opening poem “Her & It,” he added: “Other readings will occur to anybody listening.” (CP 291) During the brief period of the book’s composition (he claimed that it was written in five weeks) Berryman sent drafts of the poems to Richard Wilbur and William Meredith. Wilbur replied on one occasion that Berryman “ought to write an additional poem or passage in which he explained that he was *not* writing a full literary biography.”⁴¹ Berryman took Wilbur’s advice seriously and in “Message” he declares, “I am not writing an autobiography-in-verse, my friends.” (CP 201) That he was not writing straightforward autobiography, however, should have been clear already, and especially “to anybody listening” to the philosophical and cultural allusions in *Love & Fame*, for example. When, at the start of Part II the speaker of the poem “Away” says farewell to

America and sets sail for Europe and the “haunts of old masters where I may improve” (CP 189), a change in the speaker’s interests is clearly signalled, and the salacious anecdotes of Part I are gradually replaced by accounts of literary hero-worship and reading-lists, which are described in “London” for example:

In half an hour, alive after crossing Oxford Street,
that bloody lefthand traffic,
I was downstairs in Bumpus’, O paradiso
where I grabbed the Oxford collection of Keats’s letters
& the Sloss & Wallis edition of Blake’s *Prophetic Books*.

(CP 191)

The arrogance of the seducer described in Part I is substituted in Part II by the figure of the aspiring writer and scholar, sketched here in “Monkhood”:

I don’t show my work to anybody, I am quite alone.
The only souls I feel toward are Henry Vaughan & Wordsworth.
This guy Dylan Thomas though is hotter than anyone we have in
 America
& hardly at all like Auden.

.....

Will I ever write properly, with passion & exactness,
of the damned strange demeanours of my flagrant heart?
& be by anyone anywhere undertaken?
One *more* unanswerable question.

(CP 194-95)⁴²

Although Dylan Thomas is described here as “hotter than anyone we have in America” he is a lesser presence in *Love & Fame* than Auden in many respects. Auden is referred to on a number of occasions throughout *Love & Fame* and in “Shirley & Auden” mention is made of *The Orators*, first published in 1932: “When I flew through *The Orators* first / I felt outstretched, like an archaeologist”. (CP 172) In a “Foreword” to the 1966 reprint of *The Orators* Auden wrote that “The central theme of *The Orators* seems to be Hero-worship, and we all know what that can lead to politically.”⁴³ In *Love & Fame* Berryman describes the fantasies of fame indulged in by a young writer who has yet to

realise the full political potency of his cultural self-positioning, what he described in “Desire Is a World By Night” as “the politics of praise.” (CP 34) One of the reasons why the adolescent speaker of the first half of *Love & Fame* is so “distasteful” is that he has not yet realised this fact. Rather, he indulges in the adoration of great men without any concern for what it is they represent. He “recognized Auden at once as a new master” but he had little or no sense of what Auden (and the early socially and politically engaged Auden especially) represented. As Berryman writes of him in “In & Out”: this figure had “No politics.” (CP 182)

Beginning in Part III, however, he is placed very clearly in the thick of things, contemplating the offensive world: “My world offends my eyes” Berryman writes in “Dante’s Tomb.” (CP 207) In several overtly political poems, the “distasteful Braggart” that Berryman described as the protagonist of “Her & It” is replaced by a self acutely aware of his place in society. The apparently straightforward title of “In & Out,” in fact, describes on one level the fleeting sexual fantasies of the speaker in the first half of *Love & Fame*, but it also describes in “plain-saying” terms the basic structure of the book of as a whole, divided as it is between two fundamental modes of activity, the private and the public.⁴⁴ In his dedication of *The Orators* to Stephen Spender in 1932, Auden wrote that: “Private faces in public places / Are wiser and nicer / Than public faces in private places.”⁴⁵ Auden’s dedicatory verse strikes at the heart of the interpretative dilemma posed by *Love & Fame* concerning the limits of (auto)biography and the extent to which the self described in the book engages with the public world or *polis*. In his verse for Spender, Auden seems to suggest that the “private” self may be exposed in public, that it is worse when “public faces” appear in “private places.” In other words, Auden advocates a form of “public” poetic candour *against* the censorious incursions of some external (public) order on the private life of the individual, a point that is elaborated in the “Prologue” to *The Orators*: “With the finest of mapping pens he fondly traces / All

the family names on familiar places.”⁴⁶ Tracing “All the family names on familiar places” the speaker in Auden’s poem marks the public space with details of the private life: genealogy is imprinted upon geography, the “private” is bound up with “public.”

In the first two parts of *Love & Fame*, broadly speaking, Berryman describes a figure who fails to realise the “public” consequences of his “private” actions. Although he still gathers anecdotes (“inspired by Aubrey”—author of *Brief Lives* and *Scandal and Credulities*) he gradually enters a world of work and seriousness where “There are no stories about these rooms or this staircase or this Court”, as Berryman writes in “The Other Cambridge.” (CP 192) This marks a change from the earlier world of “Brooks Hall’s little visiting rooms” where “In blunt view of whoever might pass by” the speaker and his lover “fondled each other’s wonders” in “Cadenza on Garnette.” (CP 170) Not only does the speaker’s “world” change, from “New” to “Old,” however, in the first two parts of *Love & Fame*, but so does his world-view. By the end of Part II, and more distinctly in the course of Part III, the speaker abandons his selfish thoughts of sexual conquest and fame and turns towards matters of considerable social and, indeed, moral import. Marking this important transition is the third-last poem of Part II, “Transit,” which begins with a lugubrious description of the foreign scholar alone in the Old World (“O a little lonely in Cambridge that first Fall”) and ends with a selfless recognition of major events abroad (the Spanish Civil War) and a meditation on a former classmate’s suicide:

The news from Spain got worse. The President of my Form
at South Kent turned up at Clare, one of the last let out of Madrid.
He designed the Chapel the School later built
& killed himself, I never heard why
or just how, it was something to do with a bridge.

(CP 197)

The phrase “I never heard why / or just how” is important because it signifies a reluctance to provide the actual details of the suicide: the speaker refuses, or perhaps he is unable, to “tell it all.”

The refusal to “tell it all” in *Love & Fame* has less to do with self-censorship, however, than it has with the fact that many details of the self are “occluded & lost”, as Berryman puts it in “Message”:

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.

(CP 201)

The occlusion of details implies not only that certain facts have been withheld but that events have been forgotten and, more importantly, that parts of the life have achieved closure. Consequently, Parts III and IV of *Love & Fame* describe a movement away from the mode of living described in Parts I and II that is comparable to the contrast between the attitudes towards the poetic existence offered in the first and second parts of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*. In Parts III and IV of *Love & Fame* a speaker comes into being who comprehends the importance of “ethical continuity [...] over against aesthetic immediacy and the self-criticism of the conscience-bearing will is opposed to aesthetic enjoyment”, as Hans-Georg Gadamer has written of the shift between the first and second parts of *Either/Or*.⁴⁷ The relevance of this comparison between Berryman and Kierkegaard is more obvious with respect to *Love & Fame* than it is with *Recovery*. Kierkegaard is not only mentioned in one of the poems in Part III of *Love & Fame* (“The Search”) as one of the speaker's major interests—“Wellisch on *Isaac & Oedipus* / supplements for me Kierkegaard” (CP 200)—but the “transit” from the accounts of the “distasteful Braggart” and self-important seducer of Parts I and II to the more ethically responsible figure of Parts III and IV parallels the structure of *Either/Or* which also

begins with a description of the “aesthetic life” (containing “The Seducer’s Diary”) and ends with a lengthy meditation on the meaning of the “ethical life.” (Auden, coincidentally, the author acknowledged as an early “master” in *Love & Fame*, wrote in one of his last poems that, when the “hair-raising things / that Hitler and Stalin were doing / forced me to think about God” it was “Wild Kierkegaard, Williams, and Lewis / guided me back to belief.”⁴⁸)

An understanding of Kierkegaard’s influence on Berryman’s writing at this time in his career is therefore crucial to an appreciation of both its philosophical complexity and its frequently undervalued critical agency. Kierkegaard’s importance in contemporary debates has been undermined because of what some commentators see as his work’s confessional emphasis, as George Pattison, Steven Shakespeare, and a number of other specialists have shown in their recent interrogation of “the stereotype of Kierkegaard as the archetypical and apolitical individualist.”⁴⁹ This view of the philosopher has, in the words of Pattison and Shakespeare, “played an important role in the gradual marginalizing of Kierkegaard’s work in the period since the 1960s, when existentialism began to go out of fashion and we learned that all thought and language were culturally conditioned in ways more complex and deep-rooted than even Marxist reductionism had suggested.”⁵⁰ Moreover, Kierkegaard’s unfashionable place in contemporary philosophy is described by Pattison and Shakespeare as a consequence of the transformation in thinking that coincided with the demise of existentialism and the casting of doubt “upon the coherence and transcendent worth of such notions as Subject, Author, and even Man himself”⁵¹. In the context of Berryman studies a similar critical backlash against the author-centred confessionalism that was seen to dominate poetic discourse during the 1960s may be held responsible for the widespread refusal to read Berryman’s later work as anything more than an autobiographical evocation of the poet himself. Rather than read these writings as the work of a poet for whom (as

Pattison and Shakespeare have said of Kierkegaard) “the categories of the individual and the social are themselves called into question”⁵² critics have preferred to read Berryman’s poems, as Louise Glück has commented, as if they are his “fingerprints,”⁵³ fragments of self to be reconstructed in the reading process. This illusion of autobiographical wholeness is destabilised, however, by the “mixed messages”⁵⁴ of Berryman’s poetry, which unsettle all but the most arrogant reader’s confidence in the idea of the work-as-confession.

One aspect of what Glück terms the “mixed messages” of Berryman’s poetry is its blend of intellectual speculation and low comedy, characterised by the mixture of bawdy anecdote and philosophical inquiry in *Love & Fame*, and indeed the whole book seems to present a “mixed message” in the form of two distinct personalities. In “The Immediate Erotic Stages or the Musical Erotic,” one of the pieces contained in the Part I of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard invokes the figure of Don Juan as “the embodiment of our primal, insatiable desire for enjoyment through an immediate gratification of the senses, especially sexual desire.”⁵⁵ In this he resembles the figure described in Berryman’s “Two Organs” who, “stood up in the rowboat fishing to take a leak / & exclaimed as he was about it with excitement // ‘I wish my penis was big enough for this whole lake!’ ” (CP 179) In *The Dream Songs*, as Haffenden has shown (after Douglas Dunn and Jerome McGann), Berryman utilised the model of Byron’s *Don Juan* in his conception of the long poem’s design.⁵⁶ The figure of Don Juan is portrayed by Kierkegaard in *Either/Or* as “the representative of sensuousness in [...] demonic form”; moreover, he represents, “on a spiritless level, the rebel in us, the desire within us to gratify our natural inclinations without constraints, without regard for others, in total freedom and total enjoyment of life.”⁵⁷ This description of Kierkegaard’s Don Juan might also be applied to the seducer of Parts I and II of *Love & Fame* who, in the first stanza of “In & Out” describes “The verve I flooded toward in *Don Giovanni?*”. (CP 182)

That “verve,” however, is modulated in the course of Parts III and IV of *Love & Fame* where Berryman, like Kierkegaard in the second part of *Either/Or*, concentrates his energies on providing the basis for a more balanced and ethically responsible mode of existence. Sylvia Walsh has described this movement in Kierkegaard’s text in terms of a distinction between “the romantic pattern of living poetically” and “an ethical pattern of living poetically”:

In contrast to the romantic pattern of living poetically [...] in volume 1 of *Either/Or*—an ethical pattern of living poetically is etched in volume 2. Unlike the romantic design, which experiments with a multiplicity of possible self-identities, this pattern is modeled on 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 [...] The figure in which the pattern is exemplified in this instance is that of a married man, Judge William, the pseudonymous “author” of two long epistolary essays in this volume. [...] He thus mounts a concerted effort in the form of two “letters” to his friend, the romantic aesthete of volume 1, *to make a convincing case for the aesthetic validity of marriage and the need for a balance between the aesthetic and the ethical in the development of personality*.⁵⁸

In Parts III and IV of *Love & Fame* Berryman mounts a similar defence of the importance of marriage, the family, and work, to that described in the second part of Kierkegaard’s text. Moreover, in the sequence that constitutes Part IV of *Love & Fame* (“Eleven Addresses to the Lord”) Berryman argues “the need for a balance between the aesthetic and the ethical in the development of personality” that not only aligns him with Kierkegaard’s “ethical-existential” position but more importantly defines the moral function and tone of Berryman’s later work.

That tone is introduced by a number of the overtly political poems that Berryman placed in Part III of *Love & Fame*. “Have a Genuine American Horror-&-Mist on the Rocks” and “To a Woman” are particularly interesting examples, but a sense of ethical responsibility *for others* is registered most impressively by poems such as “The Hell Poem,” “Death Ballad,” “I Know,” and “Purgatory.” In these poems the charge that Berryman’s later work is grounded in a poetics of avoidance is countered by an intense

social and environmental criticism, described in the first stanza of “To a Woman” where he urges the reader to realise that, “The problem is urgent, yes, for this hot light / we so love may not last. / *Man* seems to be darkening himself”. (CP 204) The theme of imminent environmental collapse is reiterated in “Have a Genuine American Horror-&-Mist on the Rocks,” where Berryman writes of some “14,500 six-ton concrete-&-steel vaults of nerve-gas rockets, lethal” recently dumped on the floor of the Atlantic by the American military:

The terrible trains crawl seaward thro’ the South,
where TV teams quiz small-town citizens:
‘Waal . . . if the Army says it’s safe, it’s okay with me.
Ah’ve got a boy in Veetnam.’

All this mad stuff has been there fifteen years!
leaking coffins. Had the Chinese come
down in Korea, who knows? then or now knows?
Nobody *knows anything*

but somewhere up in the murky constellation
of Government & the scientists & the military
responsible to no-one someone knows
that he too doesn’t know anything

and can’t say what would then have happened or will ‘now’ *happen*
on the Atlantic bottom in the long dark
of decades of ecology to come
while the 20th Century flies insanely on.

(CP 203)

This poem marks an important shift from the seducer’s self-centred epistemological uncertainties of the earlier poems of *Love & Fame* (described, for example, in “Shirley & Auden” and “Images of Elspeth”) to a more worldly sense of doubt concerning the future of the planet and life on it, “in the long dark / of decades of ecology to come / while the 20th Century flies insanely on.”

“Man is a huddle of need” Berryman writes in the poem of that title, but in Part III of *Love & Fame* he is generally less concerned with describing any individual’s physical or sexual needs than he is with exploring what he terms the “Protractions of return / to

the now desired but frightful outer world” in “The Hell Poem.” (CP 208-9) In a movement similar to the slow return to society described in the course of Alan Severance’s narrative in *Recovery*, the poems of the third section of *Love & Fame* map a subject’s confrontation with emotional and psychological breakdown and “the lies of Society” that, it is suggested, may have caused it. Those “lies” are described in “Have a Genuine American Horror-&-Mist on the Rocks” as the secrets of an irresponsible American military who show little or no concern for the environment, and they are bound up with Berryman’s sense of the “frightful outer world” of American society in general, “The American Nightmare” identified by Severance in *Recovery*. (R 158)

(iii)

“Epictetus is in some ways my favourite philosopher”, Berryman writes in “Of Suicide.” (CP 206) Epictetus, a Greek Stoic philosopher who stressed self-renunciation and the brotherhood of man, presides with Kierkegaard over the poems of Parts III and IV of *Love & Fame* as a reminder of the importance of ethical self-awareness and responsibility to one’s family and fellow human beings. As Berryman puts it in the same poem, “A basis rock-like of love & friendship / for all this world-wide madness seems to be needed.” (CP 206) In the second part of *Either/Or* Kierkegaard, through the persona of Judge Wilhelm, describes the importance of work, marriage, and friendship in terms of their role in establishing “equilibrium between the aesthetic and the ethical in the development of personality.”⁵⁹ A similar effort is recorded in *Love & Fame* where the extreme indulgences of the seducer-self described in Parts I and II are offset by a sense of responsibility for others and the world in general in Parts III and IV, as when the speaker assumes the role of counsellor to fellow-patients in a psychiatric hospital, and the figures of “Tyson & Jo” in particular. The psychiatric disorder or “madness” usually associated with such people as Berryman describes is explained in terms of a more pervasive “world-wide madness” which he suggests (in “Death Ballad”) is the result of an

uncaring and irresponsible society that lies to people and insists that its most unfortunate citizens “don’t exist.” (CP 210) Berryman describes Tyson’s flight from society into hospital where she (and the other long-term inmates) become invisible to the outside world, and incapable of communication with it:

Young Tyson hasn’t eaten since coming back.
She went to a wedding, her mother harangued her
it was all too much for her
she sipped wine with a girl-friend, she fled here.

Many file down for shock & can’t say after
whether they ate breakfast. Dazed till four.
One word is: the memory will come back.
Ah, weeks or months. Maybe.

Behind the locked door, called ‘back there’,
the worse victims.
Apathy or ungovernable fear
cause them not to watch through the window starlight.

(CP 209)

These patients, it is suggested, have fled *from* society, and either “Apathy or ungovernable fear” prevents them from returning to or even contemplating it “through the window starlight.”

The speaker of these poems pleads with Tyson and Jo to return to a world of love and friendship, as he is about to, but they “prefer Hell”, having been already “forbidden to communicate / either their love or their hate.” (CP 210) In the closing poems of Part III of *Love & Fame* the speaker prepares to rejoin his own family with a renewed sense of the strength that may be drawn from them and his work. As Berryman writes in “Purgatory”: “The days are over, I leave after breakfast / with fifteen hundred things to do at home; / I made just now my new priority list.” (CP 211) In the final poem of Part III (“The Home Ballad”) Berryman once again acknowledges the linear structure of the book as a whole: “It’s *Love & Fame* called, honey Kate, / you read it from the start”. (CP 215) Despite its references to Berryman’s wife (Kate Donahue),

however, “The Home Ballad” is less important for its use in (re)constructing the poet’s biography than it is for its completion of the Kierkegaardian design of *Love & Fame*. “The Home Ballad” brings Part III to an important (and open-ended) conclusion by situating the protagonist of *Love & Fame* back in society, facing up to his responsibilities before the thanksgiving of Part IV (“Eleven Addresses to the Lord”) and the rediscovery of faith described and celebrated therein. The final abandonment of the empty pursuit of “love” and “fame” described in the book’s title takes place in Part IV, where the poet places his trust in the “Sole watchman of the flying stars” (CP 217) and celebrates God as the “Master of beauty, craftsman of the snowflake, / inimitable contriver, / endower of Earth so gorgeous & different from the boring Moon”. (CP 215)

The rediscovery of faith described in Part IV may be read as the final rejection of the life of indulgence and self-absorption described in the earlier parts of the book. More important, however, is the persistence of the theme of ecology and Berryman’s insistence on man’s responsibility to the world on a number of occasions in “Eleven Addresses to the Lord.” The first “Address” begins with an image of the “Earth so gorgeous & different from the boring moon,” but in the second Berryman writes that: “Man is ruining the pleasant earth & man.” (CP 216) Berryman’s earlier reflections on the fact that “*Man* seems to be darkening himself” in “To a Woman” (CP 204) are here reiterated with renewed urgency when he suggests that only God can protect wayward “Man.” In the same way that the preceding sections of *Love & Fame* played man’s self-destructive impulse against an awakening ethical vision, Berryman’s descriptions of the beauty of creation are counterpoised by a recognition of Man’s pervasive and perennial capacity for self-annihilation in “Eleven Addresses to the Lord.” As Berryman writes in the second address:

Yours is the crumpling, to my sister-in-law terrifying thunder,
yours the candelabra buds sticky in Spring,
Christ's mercy,
the gloomy wisdom of godless Freud:

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)

Out of the vision of ethical responsibility described in the closing poems of Part III of *Love & Fame* Berryman arrives at an understanding of human endeavour in “Eleven Addresses to the Lord” that is neither dogmatic nor precious in its meditation of faith. Rather, the “Addresses”—and *Love & Fame* in its entirety—posit a version of ethical authority that Auden conceived in terms of the “ethical hero”: one who is “happier than his inferiors because he is already in the movement away from the dark misery of ignorance and servitude to passion towards the bright joy of freedom in knowledge and truth.”⁶⁰

Awakening into this understanding of ethical-existential liberty at the end of *Love & Fame* Berryman describes a figure who has found the strength to confront the problems of the modern world, from “the lies of Society” (CP 210) to “the gloomy wisdom of godless Freud”. (CP 216) This is a figure who has overcome “the dark misery of ignorance and servitude to passion” but yet realises that the world is fraught with difficulties, as Berryman writes in the fourth “Address”: “Caretaker! take care, for we run in straits. / Daily, by night, we walk naked to storm, / some threat of wholesale loss, to ruinous fear.” (CP 218) Although he has given up on human forms of authority and rediscovered his faith in a divine presence—as Berryman puts it in the sixth

“Address”: “Under new management, Your Majesty: / Thine.” (CP 219)—he is still painfully aware of what he will call the world’s “black corruption” (“this *schwartzze Verwesung*”) in one of the most important poems of *Delusions, Etc.*, an elegy for Georg Trakl, “Drugs Alcohol Little Sister” (CP 243). If it can be said that Berryman describes “a movement away from the dark misery of ignorance and servitude to passion towards the bright joy of freedom in knowledge and truth” (after Auden), then that “knowledge and truth” includes an intense awareness of modern man’s failings, the most significant of which is the delusion that he can avoid the movement toward ethical responsibility mapped out by the poems of *Love & Fame*.

4. “Aware to the dry throat of the wide hell in the world”:

Delusions, Etc. [of John Berryman]

(i)

A small number of the forty-three poems published in *Delusions, Etc.* were written as early as 1968: “Henry’s Understanding,” for example, was written on the eighth of December of that year, shortly after the publication of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*. Most of the poems included in the collection, however, were written in 1971, and for this reason they may be considered as an important addition to Berryman’s exploration of the themes and issues introduced in the other two major works produced during the last two years of his life, *Love & Fame* and *Recovery*. In a significant number of these poems Berryman develops the issue of the relationship between faith and commitment outlined in *Love & Fame*, but in others he revisits the matter of the largely negative critical reception of that book and the idea that the poems included in it represent little more than the most naked kind of autobiographical confession. That view of *Delusions, Etc.* has in fact been given tacit approval by Thornbury’s decision to definitively re-name the collection

DELUSIONS etc of John Berryman in his edition of Berryman's *Collected Poems 1937-71*, first published in 1989.

Thornbury's decision to use this title was based on the fact that both the printer's manuscript and what appears to be Berryman's "final" typescript for the book bear it, whereas in the first edition the title that appeared on the cover was simply *Delusions, Etc.* Thornbury rightly reminds readers of the *Collected Poems* that the first edition actually had *two* titles:

In effect, two titles were published: the first with *Delusions, Etc.* on the first unnumbered page and the second with *Delusions, Etc. of John Berryman* on the third unnumbered page with FSG's colophon credit. The longer title was easily overlooked by readers because the abbreviated title was more prominent and appeared as well on the jacket cover.

(CP 324)

Thornbury clearly needed to choose one title for the purposes of the *Collected Poems*, but by choosing the longer title he diminished something of the first edition's titular playfulness: why not have a book with *two* titles?⁶¹ Berryman thought of the book in this way (as Thornbury accepts) by referring to the volume as *Delusions, Etc.* in his correspondence, but a more important point concerns the way in which the longer title directs the reader's attention towards the poet-self in a manner that works against the book's expansive efforts at engagement with the world beyond the subjective ego of its author. The preposition "of" in the longer title suggests that the "delusions" in question only apply to the poet himself, which undermines Arpin's point (cited earlier) concerning the book's more universal human significance.

The fact that Berryman did not proof the publisher's galleys for the book (they were only posted to him three days before his death) is surely worth keeping in mind, as Thornbury's edition seems to suggest that Berryman had indicated his final intentions for the book. This was not the case, and all subsequent editions of the book have been marked in one way or another by the editorial decisions and interventions of either

Giroux or Thornbury. Some of the changes suggested by Thornbury are in fact unnecessary. His decision to respell the title of “Tierce” as “Terce” (CP 229-30), for example, works against Berryman’s lifelong preference for archaic spelling, and Berryman inserted the “i” in a late typescript draft of the poem, although Thornbury doubts whether it was in fact done by the poet. (CP 324) The business of the book’s title, however, is more crucial. Rather than having to decide between the two titles (*Delusions, Etc.* and *Delusions, Etc. of John Berryman*) one possible solution might be to bracket the “of John Berryman” part of the longer title. *Delusions, Etc. [of John Berryman]* carries with it the clear markings of editorial intervention, but it also signifies the degree to which the poet himself is both associated with the delusions of the book’s title and distanced from them, in the sense that he is not the sole party to whom these delusions apply. This brings the reader closer to Arpin’s point, and it also allows for a stronger consideration of the book’s value as critique to come into focus by holding in abeyance the apparently indomitable autobiographical self that is emphasised by narrow confessional criticism.

Writing of Berryman’s work in general, but with specific reference to *Delusions, Etc. [of John Berryman]*—hereafter abbreviated to *Delusions*, as Berryman referred to it in his *Paris Review* interview in July 1970—Diane Ackerman argues that:

In a natural way, John Berryman is oblique, private, elliptical. We seem to overhear him. Locked in a verbal spasm, he has trouble, often enough, in getting out or across, and an essential part of his performance is a rheumatism of sensibility, in which the grammar is so knotted up that his poems evince the difficulty of getting written at all.⁶²

Although she adds that he is, therefore, “a poet fully qualified for exegesis and often badly in need of it” Ackerman’s analysis concludes by collapsing Berryman back into himself, as it were, when she writes of the nine poems in the *Opus Dei* section of *Delusions* that they are “As much dares as entreaties, as much acts of defiance as calls for help, they more or less ask the Creator why the hell He hasn’t come yet and gotten John Berryman, whose untidy, cussed, bad-mouth waiting is getting on John’s overwrought nerves.”⁶³

This kind of reading encourages the reductive understanding of Berryman's poetry as naked confession, as well as reinforcing the idea that it may be read as untranscended autobiography of the kind rebuked by Carruth in his review of *Love & Fame*. By describing his work as "private" (whatever about "oblique" or "elliptical") Ackerman implies that Berryman's poetry should be considered "as a refined diary", as Forseth has said of the general critical attitude to *Recovery*.

The idea that Berryman's "private" self is thoroughly exposed by the poems included in *Delusions*, which is invited if not abetted by the prepositional "of" in the (unbracketed) title chosen by Thornbury, is in itself a delusion encouraged by the narrow confessional view of much of his writing. Paul de Man, who has censured the empathetic excesses of confessional criticism, teases out some of the problems, and consequences, of the relationship between poetry and autobiography in his essay "Autobiography as De-Facement."⁶⁴ There de Man argues that, "just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, we should say that, by the same token, none of them is or can be."⁶⁵ In one sense, of course, de Man may seem the most unlikely figure to invoke in a study that seeks to stress the relationship between a writer's work and his world; after all, in his essay "The resistance to theory" de Man writes that "It is therefore not *a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language."⁶⁶ This claim may, however, be applied to de Man's understanding of autobiography as a form of writing that promises but cannot entirely (if ever) deliver "knowledge of the self." As he puts it in "Autobiography as De-Facement":

The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge—it does not—but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions.⁶⁷

Writing that either appears or purports to be "autobiographical," then, always fails to provide the kind of "reliable self-knowledge" that many readers of Berryman's work, and

the later work especially, assume is a given of his poetry. What de Man calls “the impossibility of closure and of totalization” in autobiographical writing foregoes the possibility of a “whole” self arising out of the poetic text. By placing the figure of the author (“John Berryman”) at the centre of the collection of poems Thornbury’s longer title covertly endorses the assumption that a whole self may come into view for the reader of this work, despite the fact that many of the poems in *Delusions* work in the opposite direction to provide a more complex and universal understanding of the relationship between self and world.

(ii)

Echoing the closing lines of Yeats’s “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”—“I must lie down where all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.”⁶⁸—in “He Resigns” Berryman writes: “I must start / with a blind brow / above an empty heart” (*CP* 250). In Yeats’s *Last Poems* “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” is followed by the short poem “Politics” in which Yeats, as Daniel Albright suggests, meditates “on the propriety of themes for poems.”⁶⁹ Albright argues that in “Politics” Yeats “dismiss[es] every topical theme in favour of the most universal,” and he quotes Yeats’s letter to Dorothy Wellesley where he (Yeats) describes “Politics” as his reaction to Archibald MacLeish’s commendation of him “above other modern poets because [his] language is ‘public.’”⁷⁰ Yeats was surely underestimating the very clear “public” function of his work in this statement, however, and no-one would argue against what one critic has described as the centrality of context in Yeats’s understanding of creativity.⁷¹ “Context” need not always refer to the world “Of war and wars alarms,” of course, as Yeats puts it in “Politics,”⁷² but it nearly always signifies an awareness of a broader state of affairs, a range of worldly issues and questions concerning the general condition of the *polis*. This aspect of Berryman’s work has been thoroughly undervalued, and most notably with respect to his later works.

In the last stanza of the final poem (“Compline”) in *Opus Dei*, Berryman writes: “The sky was red. My pillow’s cold & blanched. / There are no fair bells in this city. This fireless house / lies down at Your disposal as usual! Amen!” (CP 235) The connection between public and private place or “city” and “house” is marked throughout *Delusions* where Berryman strives to describe the external (public) plane of experience with as much urgency as he might be said, on occasion, to consider the more personal (or private) aspects of his own existence. This is why the bracketed title *Delusions, Etc. [of John Berryman]* is so useful, because it allows the reader to conceive of the “delusions” and problems confronted in these poems as having universal pertinence, without losing sight of the fact that they have been identified and considered by the poet himself. Thus, in “He Resigns” Berryman reflects on “Age, and the deaths, and the ghosts” and “Her having gone away / in spirit from me” (CP 249) but this poem is preceded by a meditation on “American power and how / somehow we’ve got to be got to give it up” in “Lines to Mr Frost.” (CP 249) As a collection of poems *Delusions* rejects the narrowness of much confessional criticism, which emphasises aspects of the text that indicate personal, psychological or emotional turmoil and, therefore, frequently obscures the view of the self *in* society.

“Lines to Mr Frost” is a central poem in this regard because it offers both a model *of* and *for* reading responsibly that may be applied to Berryman’s own poetry. Reflecting on the experience of teaching Frost’s “The Draft Horse,” Berryman reads the poem as an allegory of “American power”:

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—
so help me, in my poverty-stricken way

I said the same goddamn thing yesterday
to my thirty kids, so I was almost ready
to hear you from the grave with these passionate grave
last words, and frankly Sir you fill me with joy.

(CP 249)

A way of reading poetry is described here that demands a consideration of its ability to make a purchase on our moral, social, and political understanding: in short, it recognises lyric poetry's ability to engage with the *polis*. Realising the “gravity” of Frost's metaphor in terms of its interrogation of “American power” Berryman advocates a form of reading (and teaching) poetry that Richard Rorty has described as “the real function of humanistic intellectuals”: “to instil doubt in the students about the students' own self-images, and about the society to which they belong.”⁷³

This is the major function of *Delusions* also: to “instil doubt” about society in the same manner that both *Love & Fame* and *Recovery* destabilise the complacent understanding of modern American life by placing the self in a world of uncertainty and corruption. In the opening section of *Delusions* Berryman extends the “Eleven Address to the Lord” with *Opus Dei*, what he describes as:

(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)

“such being the World”: the paradoxical unpredictability of the modern world, given the accuracy of modern physics in determining events and their outcomes—“yielding to the Hale reflector” (CP 225)—is an important factor in Berryman's reappraisal of faith in *Delusions*. The language of modern physics is invoked in the poems of *Opus Dei* and

throughout *Delusions* not because it adds intellectual credibility to Berryman's argument but, on the contrary, because it exposes the pervasiveness of technological thinking in modern life:

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

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

(CP 225)

"His winter", however, cannot be "kept out" by the technological advances of modern science. As Berryman puts it in the sixth section of *Opus Dei* ("Sext"), there is a great deal that "We do not know, deep now the dire age on". (CP 230)

It is one of the failures of modern civilisation, Berryman argues, that despite the advances of science and "current math" (CP 261), mankind has still not answered the fundamental questions of existence and being-in-the-world: "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) Faith offers some solace but it does not assuage the feeling that Hell is a human reality, as Berryman puts it in "The Facts & Issues": "I feel *dubious* on Hell— / it's here, all right, but elsewhere, after? Screw that". (CP 262) Moreover, Berryman's vision of modernity as a kind of hell is grounded in his awareness of "The American Nightmare" described in *Recovery* and elaborated in poems such as "Tampa Stomp" and "King David Dances" in *Delusions*. In the former poem especially Berryman describes the beginnings of the American Depression and its affect on ordinary individuals and their families. Although it has a basis in Berryman's own family history, and indeed it utilises phrases and images transcribed from a letter Berryman received from his mother in November 1970,⁷⁴ the poem ends by striking a note of more general significance:

The Lord fled that forlorn peninsula
of fine sunlight and millions of fishes & moccasins
& Spanish moss & the Cuban bit my father
bedded & would abandon Mother for.

Ah, an antiquity, a chatter of ghosts.
Half the fish now in half the time
since those blue days died. We're running out
of time & fathers, sore, artless about it.

(CP 247-48)

By the end of “Tampa Stomp” Berryman acknowledges that his personal experience of the Depression and “The American Nightmare” is not unique but general: “We’re running out / of time & fathers”.

In “Tampa Stomp” Berryman describes the Depression in terms of a “miasma / a weight beyond enduring, the city reeked of failure”. (CP 247) The sense of imminent collapse evoked here, however, is reiterated as a condition of modernity in general in “Gislebertus’ Eve,” the first poem of the third section of *Delusions*. Once again the limitations of modern knowledge are questioned—“from Leonardo & Darwin // to the austere Viennese with the cigar / and Bohr a-musing”—as Berryman considers the possibility that civilisation is in a state of terminal decline (or fall):

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 & Ditheletic 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)

Haffenden has argued that Berryman “is confused by the explanations of matter and the universe offered by modern physics” here,⁷⁵ but registering that sense of “confusion” is

surely central to Berryman's point, which is to reinforce an understanding of humankind "rapt in delusion"—in spite of the advances of modern physics in explaining the universe and our place in it. All versions of human reality, Berryman suggests, begin as "a new taste sensation, in reverie over / something other," from the myth of Eve and Adam in the Garden of Eden to the theories posited in the twentieth century by Sigmund Freud and Niels Henrik David Bohr.

In "The Handshake, The Entrance" Berryman borrows heavily from a song of the same title made famous by John Jacob Niles (mentioned also in the first line of "The Home Ballad" in *Love & Fame*). Berryman's poem (and Niles's song) begins: " 'You've got to cross that lonesome valley' and / 'You've got to cross it by yourself.' " (CP 248) Suggesting on one level the profoundly personal dimension of any quest for faith, Berryman stresses the importance of family and community in coming to terms with the dangers attendant on one's "walk down in the vales" (CP 249):

'You've got to cross that lonesome valley,'
Friends & lovers, link you and depart.
This one is strictly for me.
I shod myself & said goodbye to Sally
Murmurs of other farewells half broke my heart
I set out sore indeed.

(CP 248)

In this and other poems in *Delusions*, such as "Old Man Goes South Again Alone," "Henry's Understanding," and "Overseas Prayer," Berryman seems to suggest that withdrawal from society is part of the journey back to faith, but in one of the closing poems of the collection ("The Prayer of the Middle-Aged Man") he is reminded of (and seeks comfort in) the fact that Christ is frequently described "ever in the middle of something or everything" in the Gospels: "Amid the doctors in the Temple at twelve, between / mother & host at Cana implored too soon, / in the middle of disciples, the midst of the mob". (CP 261) As Haffenden has shown, Berryman's sense of Christ's

example as a historical personality “*in medio*” (Berryman was writing a book to be called *The Historical Personality of Christ* at the time of his death) is marked on a number of occasions in his work.⁷⁶ In *Delusions* Berryman strongly identifies with this image of Christ because it relates to his own sense of attachment to—and engagement with—the modern world.

(iii)

Despite claims to the contrary by numerous detractors, *Delusions*—although it is the least structurally accomplished of Berryman’s works—ends with what may be read as a summary declaration of Berryman’s awareness that modern American society (if not modernity in general) is a kind of “Hell.” “King David Dances” begins “Aware to the dry throat of the wide hell in the world” (*CP* 263) and in that line Berryman recapitulates his sense of the modern world as an infernal place of dissolution. He expresses this sentiment in a number of poems in *Delusions*, most notably in “The Facts & Issues,” but it is registered also in his brief elegy for Georg Trakl (1887-1914), “Drugs Alcohol Little Sister.” (*CP* 243) Berryman (always sensitive to chronological coincidences) was born in the year of Trakl’s death, the year of the start of the Great War. His elegy for Trakl, then, is as much a meditation on the catastrophic turn marked by the events of 1914 as it is on the death of one German soldier and poet who, “Surmounted by carrion,” as Berryman puts it, committed suicide outside a hospital camp near the front.⁷⁷ Brigitte Peucker has pressed for an appraisal of Trakl’s work against the critical attention on him as a perpetrator of incest (with his sister) and a victim of schizophrenic breakdown by arguing that, “what must supplement the idea that Trakl’s poetry is an unstructured transformation of illness and excess into language is the frequent, careful, and systematic borrowing from other poets that has been noticed by a number of his interpreters.”⁷⁸ The same might be said of Berryman, whose work (and especially the work of the later period) is frequently read for what it reveals of the poet’s personal crises although it is

often (and urgently) directed outward onto the “black corruption” or “*schwarze Verwesung*” that, he suggests, forced Trakl to “overdose & go.” (CP 243)

Helen Vendler makes an important point in an essay on Wallace Stevens where, with regard to the poet’s disputed death-bed conversion to Catholicism she argues that: “In any case, the lifework had been brought to a close before Stevens’ last days in the hospital, and any judgement on Stevens’ work must find irrelevant those events occurring after it was complete.”⁷⁹ With the possible exception of one poem written within the last forty-eight hours before his death—“I didn’t. And I didn’t.” (HF 93)—the same point can be made of Berryman’s late work, which is often read as if it “prepared us for Berryman’s death,” in the manner indicated by Lowell cited at the beginning of this chapter. The poems of *Delusions*, however, present a version of the self in resolute confrontation with “the wide hell in the world” as Berryman describes it in “King David Dances.” (CP 263) Berryman’s last poems advocate awareness and engagement over withdrawal and seclusion. As he writes in his elegy for Trakl: “let us not all together in such pain / dumb apart pale into oblivion—no!” (CP 243) In “King David Dances” Berryman proposes King David as a model of commitment: against “trampling empires”, “hypocrites” and “idolaters,” *Delusions* closes with an image of David dancing in the face of adversity and imminent disaster for him and his kingdom:

mockt 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)

The “yea” in the penultimate line of “King David Dances” is an affirmation of Berryman’s commitment to engagement with the world against the overwhelming perception of him as a poet of avoidance and self-pity. The poems of *Delusions* present examples of a self confronting society (the “State / heavy upon me”) that reinforce

Berryman's widely underestimated examination of ethical and political responsibility in *Recovery* and *Love & Fame*. Considering Berryman's last works and their reception in this light, it is tempting to conclude (with Jorge Luis Borges) that fame is perhaps the worst form of incomprehension.

Notes

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," *Labyrinths*, trans. James E. Irby (1964; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970) 62-71; 70.

² Robert Lowell, "John Berryman," *Collected Prose* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987) 104-18; 116.

³ Marjorie Perloff, "The Changing Face of Common Intercourse: Talk Poetry, Talk Show, and the Scene of Writing," *Artifice & Indeterminacy: An Anthology of New Poetics*, ed. Christopher Beach (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1998) 77-106; 91. The same error is made in Sculley Bradley *et al.*, eds. *The American Tradition in Literature* 4th ed. (1956; N.p.: Grosset & Dunlap, 1977) 1692, where it is claimed that Berryman "graduated from Columbia University and Clare College, Oxford."

⁴ John Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1980) 65-66.

⁵ Lowell, "Andrei Voznesensky," *Collected Prose* 119-21; 121.

⁶ Gary Q. Arpin, *The Poetry of John Berryman* (Port Washington, NJ: Kennikat Press, 1978) 94.

⁷ John Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* (1982; London: Ark Paperbacks, 1983) 387.

⁸ Robert S. Phillips, *The Confessional Poets* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973) 92-106; 97.

⁹ Donald Davie, "Problems of Decorum," rev. of *The Freedom of the Poet*, *New York Times Book Review* 25 Apr. 1976: 3-4; 4.

¹⁰ Hayden Carruth, "Love, Art, and Money," *Nation* 211 (2 Nov. 1970): 437-38. Reprinted in Harry Thomas, ed. *Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988) 213-18; 217.

¹¹ Carruth 217. It is important to note that Carruth's review was of the first American edition of *Love & Fame*. Berryman deleted six poems—"Thank You, Christine," "A Letter," "To B—E—," "The Soviet Union," "The Minnesota 8 and the Letter-Writers," and "Regents' Professor Berryman's Crack on Race"—from the second edition of the book, which was published in November 1972. The deleted poems are not included in Thornbury's edition of Berryman's *Collected Poems 1937-1971*.

¹² Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* 4.

¹³ Alan J. Altimont, "The End of *Recovery* and the End of Self-Representation," in Richard J. Kelly and Alan K. Lathrop, eds. *Recovering Berryman: Essays on a Poet* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993) 257-67; 258. Altimont's emphasis.

¹⁴ Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* 402.

¹⁵ Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* 403-4.

¹⁶ Richard Forseth, "Spirits and Spirituality: Notes on the Art of John Berryman's *Recovery*," in Kelly and Lathrop 245-56; 246.

¹⁷ Forseth 246, 254.

¹⁸ See E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943; Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1970) 114-22.

¹⁹ Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (2000; London: Vintage, 2001) 108.

²⁰ Philip McGowan, "Fog People: The (Non-)Identity of the Alcohol Dependent in U.S. Literary and Cultural Representations, 1826-1988," diss., University of Dublin, Trinity College, 1996.

²¹ William Blake, *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, eds. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (London and New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979) 60-68.

²² Blake 61.

²³ Blake 53, 47.

²⁴ Blake 67.

²⁵ Blake 68.

²⁶ A longer study of Berryman's engagement with Blake might tease out the significance of Severance's understanding of enslavement in terms of what David V. Erdman has described as the cycle of "enslavement-liberation-reenslavement" in Blake's prophetic books *Europe* and *America*. Berryman's critical attitude towards American "hyperdemocracy" might be read in terms of Blake's final unwillingness to celebrate the revolutions in America and France as ends in themselves. See David V. Erdman, "America: New Expanses," in David V. Erdman and John E. Grant, eds. *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970) 92-113. Reprinted in Blake 577-87.

²⁷ David Kalstone, "Recovery: The Struggle between Prose and Life," in Harold Bloom, ed. *John Berryman: Modern Critical Views* (New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989) 49-52; 51.

²⁸ Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* 404.

²⁹ Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* 404.

³⁰ Alastair Hannay notes that "the Hebrew *selah*, a word that recurs in the Psalms of David at the end of a verse [...] can easily acquire the meaning [...] of 'refrains', i.e. something (for example a mood) repeated over and over again." Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992) 610.

³¹ Kierkegaard 43.

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- ³² Peter Stitt, "The Art of Poetry: An Interview with John Berryman," *Paris Review* 53 (Winter 1972): 177-207. Reprinted in Thomas 18-44; 38.
- ³³ Stitt 38.
- ³⁴ Allen Ginsberg, *Death & Fame: Poems 1993-1997* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999) 68-70; 70.
- ³⁵ Ginsberg 70.
- ³⁶ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979) 20-23.
- ³⁷ Ginsberg 70.
- ³⁸ Stitt 36.
- ³⁹ John Keats, *Poems*, ed. Gerard Bullett (1904; London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1961) 230.
- ⁴⁰ Jonathan Galassi, "Sorrows and Passions of His Majesty the Ego," *Poetry Nation* 2 (1974): 117-20.
- ⁴¹ Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* 362.
- ⁴² The fourth line of the first stanza of "Monkhood" ("& hardly at all like Auden") is indented in error in Thornbury's edition of Berryman's *Collected Poems* (CP 194).
- ⁴³ W. H. Auden, *The Orators: An English Study* (1932; London: Faber and Faber, 1966) 6-7.
- ⁴⁴ The bipartite structure of *Love & Fame* has been remarked by a number of critics, although none have made the connection between Berryman's texts and Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* proposed here. See Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* 67-78.
- ⁴⁵ Auden, *The Orators* [n. pag.].
- ⁴⁶ Auden, *The Orators* 9.
- ⁴⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Letter to Dallmayr," trans. Richard Palmer and Diane Michelfelder, in Michelfelder and Palmer, eds. *Dialogue & Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989) 93-101; 97.
- ⁴⁸ W. H. Auden, "A Thanksgiving," *Thank You, Fog* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974) 39-40; 39.
- ⁴⁹ George Pattison and Steven Shakespeare, "Introduction: Kierkegaard, the Individual and Society," in Pattison and Shakespeare, eds. *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society* (London: Macmillan, 1998) 1-23; 1.
- ⁵⁰ Pattison and Shakespeare 1.
- ⁵¹ Pattison and Shakespeare 2.
- ⁵² Pattison and Shakespeare 2.
- ⁵³ Louise Glück, "Against Sincerity," *Proofs and Theories* (1994; Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995) 44.
- ⁵⁴ Glück 44.
- ⁵⁵ Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994) 70. Emphasis in original.

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- ⁵⁶ Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* 64.
- ⁵⁷ Walsh 71.
- ⁵⁸ Walsh 99.
- ⁵⁹ This is the title of the second section of Part 2 of *Either/Or*. See Kierkegaard 475-590.
- ⁶⁰ W. H. Auden, *The Enchafed Flood; or, The Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) 84.
- ⁶¹ The most obvious contender for this kind of text might be William Shakespeare's *The Comical History of the Merchant of Venice, or Otherwise Called the Jew of Venice*. Other examples are Auden's *The Enchafed Flood; or, The Romantic Iconography of the Sea*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Alice du Clos, Or The Forked Tongue," Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick, or The Whale* and Ginsberg's *Death & Fame* which is called *Death & Fame: Last Poems* on the book's cover and *Death & Fame: Poems 1993-1997* on the title-page.
- ⁶² Diane Ackerman, "Near the Top a Bad Turn Dared," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 7.2 (Spring-Summer 1979). Reprinted in Bloom 101-109; 101.
- ⁶³ Ackerman 107.
- ⁶⁴ Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 67-81.
- ⁶⁵ De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* 70.
- ⁶⁶ Paul de Man, "The resistance to theory," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986): 788-95. Reprinted in David Lodge, ed. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (London and New York: Longman, 1988) 355-371; 362.
- ⁶⁷ De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* 70-71.
- ⁶⁸ W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, 2nd ed. (1991; London: Macmillan, 1993) 348.
- ⁶⁹ W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (1990; London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1991) 844.
- ⁷⁰ Cited by Albright in Yeats, *The Poems* 844.
- ⁷¹ Terence Brown, preface, *Creativity and its Contexts*, ed. Chris Morash (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1995) viii.
- ⁷² Yeats 348.
- ⁷³ Richard Rorty, "The Humanistic Intellectual: Eleven Theses," *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999) 127-30; 127.
- ⁷⁴ The full text of this letter is included in Richard J. Kelly, ed. *We Dream of Honour: John Berryman's Letter to His Mother* (London and New York: W. W. Norton, 1988) 377-80. See also Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* 144.
- ⁷⁵ Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* 144.
- ⁷⁶ Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* 155.
- ⁷⁷ In a page of notes under the heading "War Poetry" contained in his copy of George Decq, *Red Cabbage: Poems* (New York: Exposition Press, 1970), now held in the Wilson Library at the

University of Minnesota, Berryman suggests a parallel between Trakl's descriptions of his experiences of the First World War and contemporary portrayals of the Vietnam War, such as those offered by Decq in *Red Cabbage*. See Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* 388.

⁷⁸ Brigitte Peucker, "Georg Trakl: The Revisionary Language of Descent," in Harold Bloom, ed. *Modern German Poetry* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989) 123-37; 124.

⁷⁹ Helen Vendler, "The Hunting of Wallace Stevens: Critical Approaches," *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988) 75-90; 80.

CONCLUSION

In his book *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (1991) Neil Jumonville suggests that “The New York intellectuals [...] used *ideology* to mean an outlook that was utopian and abstract rather than practical, fanatically committed to an ideal rather than rationally analytical, an absolute vision that embodied total solutions rather than tentative hypotheses.”¹ Jumonville provides a “rough list of the New York intellectuals” that includes a number of individuals with whom John Berryman was involved at various stages in his career, including Saul Bellow, Dwight Macdonald, Isaac Rosenfeld, and Delmore Schwartz.² Berryman is not included in Jumonville’s “rough list,” but he is present in the book—almost accidentally—in a photograph that was taken at a gathering in New York in 1947.³ Not all of the people in the photograph are included in Jumonville’s list. Mary McCarthy, Dwight Macdonald, Lionel Abel, and Elizabeth Hardwick are there, as is Nicola Chiaromonte, the editor of the Italian journal *Tempo Presente*, but Chiaromonte’s wife Miriam is not included, nor is McCarthy’s brother Kevin. Given the fact that at this point in his career he was engaged on a similar project of dismantling the Americanist “absolute vision” that was central to the work of the New York intellectuals as Jumonville describes it, Berryman’s exclusion from the list is curious.

Jumonville’s exclusion of Berryman might be explained by the broadly historical sweep of his study. Moreover, *Critical Crossings* is not a literary but an intellectual history. Nevertheless, it is emblematic of a more widespread refusal to appreciate the ideological engagements of Berryman’s poetry. Berryman is rarely a writer of outspoken protest, but neither is Saul Bellow or Elizabeth Hardwick, who are both included in Jumonville’s list. As this thesis has shown, studies of Berryman’s writing have tended to either undervalue or ignore the public or political engagements that it embodies. In an overview of

Berryman's career in his introduction to *Berryman's Shakespeare* (1999), John Haffenden describes *The Dream Songs* as "an astonishing modern epic in which Berryman displayed much of his personality and experience," and he suggests that "The autobiographical daring of his poetry began in 1947 with *Berryman's Sonnets* (published in 1967), a sequence which charts the fortunes of a love affair."⁴ The analyses of Berryman's poetry offered in the preceding chapters have not attempted to deny the fact that these works describe Berryman's personal experiences of infidelity, desire, and loss; nor have they sought to undervalue the importance of these matters in an overall appreciation of Berryman's work. What has been attempted is a re-negotiation of Berryman's profile against the view that his work is nothing more than an example of the kind of poetry that elicits the response articulated by Richard Gray, for example, who has written of *The Dream Songs* that "This is not so much confessional poetry, in fact, as pure confession: moving, sometimes, in the way that confidences of any stranger might be, but not something in which we can begin to share."⁵

Gray's complaint that Berryman's poetry is "not something in which we can begin to share" is symptomatic of the desire for empathy between author and reader that Paul de Man criticises as a hindrance to studies of Rainer Maria Rilke's writings. "The narcissism that is often ascribed to him no doubt exists," de Man writes of Rilke, "but on a very different level from that of a reader using him as a reflector of his own inner image."⁶ Gray expresses a sense of disappointment with what he perceives to be the failure of *The Dream Songs* to provide "a reflector of his own inner image"—"something in which we can begin to share"—suggesting not only that Berryman's poem is incapable of promoting a feeling of intimacy between the poet and the reader but, more alarmingly, that it is of little relevance or bearing to the world in general. Haffenden's description of the "autobiographical daring" of Berryman's writing is not unrelated to Gray's description of it as "pure confession," but neither attitude to the work—one positive and

the other hostile—does anything to advance the view that Berryman's poetry engages with a world beyond the reaches of the author-self.

Writing of the way in which readers of Rilke's poetry are seduced by its apparent confessionality, de Man suggests that "One could approach and interpret a sizeable part of his poetry by way of the negative road that would analyze this seduction." Rather than adapt that approach de Man writes that "It may be preferable [...] to understand the work in a less antithetical way and to read the poetic texts themselves, rather than letters and confessional prose that may well turn out to be of contingent importance."⁷ With respect to Berryman, his unpublished letters and prose are of considerable importance in the attempt to redefine the level of engagement with social, cultural, and political issues in his poetry. Throughout this study it has been seen that Berryman frequently worked out his ideas about politics and culture in his letters and what might be described as his less publicly visible artistic involvements. The relative invisibility of Berryman's cultural politics, indeed, may be described as a consequence of the refusal to recognise those involvements as aspects of his work's ideological function. Berryman's collaboration with Ben Shahn in the first book publication of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, for example, has been entirely overlooked in Berryman studies, as has his working relationship with many of those figures mentioned by Jumonville as major players in the New York group, such as Macdonald and Schwartz. A collection of Berryman's unpublished critical prose and a selected edition of his literary correspondence would aid greatly this attempt to instigate a reappraisal of the public and political engagements of his work. New instalments to the Berryman canon will undoubtedly increase the general awareness of the range of his critical, cultural, and intellectual interests.

Quite apart from specific studies of Berryman's work there is the view that American poetry is generally less politically motivated than its European counterpart, as Tom Paulin suggests in his introduction to *The Faber Book of Political Verse* (1986) where

he writes that “There is, sadly, a rather meagre tradition of political verse in the United States.”⁸ This is related to Robert Bly’s reading of American poetry in his essay “A Wrong Turning in American Poetry” (1963) where he suggests that the “outstanding characteristic of the generation of 1947”—which includes Berryman, Lowell, Schwartz, as well as Randall Jarrell, Karl Shapiro, and Howard Nemerov—“is its reluctance to criticize ideas handed down to them.”⁹ Towards the end of his essay, however, Bly claims that:

The best thought in this century moves inward. This movement has been sustained by Freud, by great poetry of Europe and South America, by painting, by the most intelligent men. The weakness of our poetry is that it does not share in this movement.

Most of our poetry so far has nothing to give us because, like its audience, it drifts aimlessly in the world. A country’s poetry can drift outward, like the lives of most of its people, or it can plunge inward, trying for great intensity. Inward poetry deepens all life around it. Other poets have given their countries this gift. If we fail in this, of what use if our life? As Lorca says, life is not a dream.¹⁰

Bly advocates a poetics of inwardness here that problematises the critique of detachment offered earlier regarding the poets of the “generation of 1947.” The analytical instability of Bly’s account might be explained in terms of the “rudeness” that he “regrets” in the preface to *American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity* (1990),¹¹ where this piece is reprinted. Bly’s unrelenting contrariness can also be read in terms of the understanding of (American) poetry’s political (non-)agency that informs Paulin’s account, where he argues that “the [racial] injustice which so disfigures American society is most persuasively criticized by Blues singers—they are the most authentic political poets and their work challenges the more comfortable written tradition.”¹² The idea—supported in different ways by Paulin and Bly—that certain poets are more *authentic* than others in their engagements with politics or culture has less to do with poetry itself, however, than it has with the ideological affiliations of individual commentators and the hierarchies and critical topographies constructed by them.

Paulin explores the New Critical attempt to de-politicise poetry in the opening paragraph of his introduction to *The Faber Book of Political Verse*, where he writes that:

Indeed, there is an influential school of literary criticism—appropriately, it dominates literary studies in the United States—which argues that the political and historical content of literature must be dismissed as ‘extrinsic irrelevance’. The practitioner of close reading agrees with Henry Ford that history is bunk and enforces that belief with a series of fallacies—biographical, intentional, historical, ‘personalist’, ideological. Like intimidating heresies, these supposedly fallacious ways of reading literature are designed to hinder the reader who believes that there is often a relationship between formal garden and contingent scrapheap.¹³

Given his admission that there is “often a relationship between formal garden and contingent scrapheap”—between the well-made poem and a gritty social reality—Paulin’s subsequent claim regarding the poverty of American “political” poetry is peculiar. Nevertheless, it points to one dominant mode of reading that has contributed to the view that American poetry of the post-war period is academic and detached, what Walter Kalaidjian has described as a “critical silence surrounding poetry’s worldly contexts” which “is symptomatic of the intrinsic reading habits long fostered by American New Criticism.”¹⁴ Berryman rejected the “reading habits” of the New Criticism early in his career, and in an unpublished essay called “The Old Criticism” he argued that:

the usefulness of the school of literary criticism which has dominated American poetry for decades is now exhausted, that the defects of the school’s influence have come to outweigh its merits, and that it should be replaced by a criticism less crabbed, more tolerant, better informed, more independent of its objects.¹⁵

Commentators have long held the view that Berryman’s rejection of the New Criticism is expressed by his insistence on personality over (Eliotic) impersonality in his poetry. This thesis has described another facet of Berryman’s rejection of the New Critical reduction of the possibilities of poetry by stressing the worldly character of his work, its persistent questioning of the meaning of mainstream American cultural and political authority—of which the New Criticism was an important part (as both Paulin and Kalaidjian suggest).

In the fourth chapter of this study it was suggested that the opening of *Dream Song* 312—"I have moved to Dublin to have it out with you, / majestic Shade"—signifies not only Berryman's engagement with the figure of Yeats but with authority in general, cultural and political. Berryman's turn towards the European figure of Yeats at the start of his career was bound up with his rejection of American authority and his understanding of what, in "Desire Is a World by Night," he terms "the politics of praise." (CP 34) Berryman's interrogation of American authority, moreover, may be read in terms of the questioning of the exceptionalist "absolute vision" that Jumonville claims was central to the ideological work of the New York group. In an uncollected poem for one of the members of that group, Isaac Rosenfeld, Berryman writes: "I have to glare / into a room where, half-through, he cramp'd dead, / where all his lovers, seeking his cry, drown, / and solo I reel in a word dispelled."¹⁶ Saul Bellow has written that in the final years of his life Rosenfeld "was solitary, and on Walton Place in one of his furnished rooms he died alone."¹⁷ Berryman's poem suggests that Rosenfeld was driven out—"dispelled"—from the centre of intellectual and cultural activity with which he had been associated less than a decade earlier. The final line of his poem for Rosenfeld might also be used, however, to describe the way in which Berryman himself has been categorised in literary and cultural histories of the post-war period as a solipsistic outsider, an anatomist of personal rather than social despair. By stressing the importance of Berryman's critical engagements with the world in his writing, this study offers both an alternative to the narrow confessionalism that has dominated Berryman criticism in the past *and* a basis for more generously centrifugal readings of his work in the future.

Notes

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- ¹ Neil Jumonville, *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (Berkeley and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991) 241.
- ² Jumonville 239-40.
- ³ Photograph reproduced courtesy of Vassar College Library in Jumonville 150.
- ⁴ John Haffenden, introduction, *Berryman's Shakespeare* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999) xi-lxviii; xii.
- ⁵ Richard Gray, "The confessional 'I' as martyr: Berryman," *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Longman, 1990) 256-60; 260.
- ⁶ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979) 20
- ⁷ De Man 21
- ⁸ Tom Paulin, "Political Verse," *Writing to the Moment: Selected Critical Essays 1980-1996* (1996; London: Faber and Faber, 1998) 101-39; 133.
- ⁹ Robert Bly, "A Wrong Turning in American Poetry," *American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity* (1990; New York: HarperPerennial, 1991) 7-35; 24.
- ¹⁰ Bly 34-5.
- ¹¹ Bly vii-viii; vii.
- ¹² Paulin 136.
- ¹³ Paulin 101.
- ¹⁴ Walter Kalaidjian, *Languages of Liberation: The Social Text in Contemporary American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) xi.
- ¹⁵ John Berryman, "The Old Criticism," Unpublished Non-fiction Prose, Box 2, JBP.
- ¹⁶ John Berryman, "Of Isaac Rosenfeld," *Partisan Review* 23.4 (Fall 1956): 494.
- ¹⁷ Saul Bellow, foreword, *Preserving the Hunger: An Isaac Rosenfeld Reader*, ed. Mark Shechner (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988) 13-16; 16.

APPENDIX 1

“THE AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL AND THE AMERICAN DREAM” (1947)

Now held in the John Berryman Papers (Unpublished Prose, Box 2) at the University of Minnesota, the unfinished draft of an essay entitled “The American Intellectual and the American Dream” is dated “17 Nov[ember] [19]47” and consists of three and a half single-spaced typed pages with pencil annotations. Those annotations have been added here as footnotes and, where expedient, they have been incorporated into the text of the essay in square brackets. Pencilled notes on the typescript suggest that the piece was intended to be used as the opening essay in a longer study, never realised, to be called *The American Intellectual*. In his preliminary notes Berryman indicates that the piece was written in part as a response to Mary McCarthy’s essay “America the Beautiful: The Humanist in the Bathtub,” which appeared in the September 1947 issue of *Commentary*. From his notes it can also be seen that Berryman planned to show the essay to the critics Dwight and Nancy Macdonald before publishing it. It was neither published nor revised for publication, however, for reasons that must remain unclear—although the essay’s opening sentence (“I hate America”) may have had something to do with that. It is included here because it reinforces the claim, advanced throughout this study, that Berryman’s cultural politics may be explained in terms of his early rejection of American authority. Written before the publication of his first major collection *The Dispossessed* (1948), “The American Intellectual and the American Dream” provides a basis for understanding the interrogations of the national self that are central to the ideological work attempted by Berryman’s later work—up to and including the posthumously published novel *Recovery* and its critique of American “hyperdemocracy.”

[Mary¹:
 unworthiness of objects
 symbolic acquisitiveness
 passivity
 unworldliness
 ‘nomadic virtues’ & nakedness
 ‘we are still nature’s noblemen’
 ‘the happy ending is our national belief’
 ‘We cannot hate it’
 (anti-European; ‘national feeling’, not patriotism; the Bomb)]

Re-read: Emerson, V W Brooks 1915, Santayana, M V D’s *Autobiography of America*, Gorer’s forthcoming & the early volumes of my Journals (indexing them cursorily)]

I hate America. One’s attitude towards something so complex & pressing as one’s country can hardly fail to be ambivalent (see any psycholan. [sic] writings on the subject), but it’s as well to say explicitly at once what one *feels* one feels. I *hate* America, then. 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.

Shapiro’s anti-“America” *vs.* Schwartz’s whole feeling (cite his review of Shapiro, e.g., and note both Jews, i.e. minority, the other best-known poet of the generation also minority, Lowell); Shapiro’s feeling proved the norm by an analysis of the American number of *Horizon*. (Schwartz’s an exceptional, immigrant attitude, rhetorical & incomprehensible (though moving) to a ‘native’, anachronistic.) Scarcely any parallel in cultural history for this universal and unqualified condemnation of a country by its most thoughtful & sensitive (not ‘subjects’) *citizens*.

The *generation* is important: theirs & mine. Trained in the Left-wing decade, the Thirties; when the Depression and the American government’s failure-in-regard-to-Spain alienated intellectuals altogether from sympathy with Amer[ican] authority.

Dominant artistic influences were expatriate-American: Eliot, Pound, James; and the expatriate-Twenties people (Hemingway, MacLeish etc). The problem of whether anything could be written *here* again seemed very important. The interesting poets (Stevens, Ransom, Tate; Robinson, Frost) either were unappreciated in their *pays* or were

¹ Mary McCarthy, “America The Beautiful: The Humanist in the Bathub,” *Commentary* (Sept. 1947): 201-7.

too old; the appearance of Auden & Spender & *A Hope for Poetry* was exciting far beyond anything we had. Prose writers for me at any rate hardly existed here.² *Hound & Horn* and *The Dial* had died before we appeared—everything seemed over—and the new *Southern* opened its first number with an essay so perfect in its climatic feeling that it seemed a confirmation of one's worst fears. The 'American' philosophers I studied in college were Europeans: Santayana & Whitehead. Einstein was our scientist, Eddington & Jeans his expositors; Picasso our painter; we had no dramatist, or Ibsen was,—another expatriate; Stravinsky and cult-jazz were our music; the films that mattered were French or Russian or German,—if Hollywood made anything but musicals & gangster films, it was *They Won't Forget*, an indictment of racism, or *The Informer*, an Irish revolutionary subject. America was dance music & oppression: we swayed locked in each other's arms, lulled by it, or we kicked out madly against it. What did it oppress: students, professors, writers, intellectuals, liberals, radicals, Jews, negroes [sic], workers. Hart Crane had just killed himself, unable to bear returning to it. America did not even understand its own, felt no responsibility to the few things it had: Frost we knew had appeared first in England, Miller could not be published, the only full editions of Melville and James were English ones you couldn't get here. Meanwhile everything American was so frantically over-rated that many of our best 'possessions' became an offence: O'Neill & our 'theatre' generally, our 19th c. poets, Dreiser & Anderson & Lewis & Wolfe. As for jazz: the great records were regularly let go out of print by the damned companies, the damned public did not understand it, it was produced by an immigrant and oppressed people, and a Frenchman had written the only book on it worth a fuck (Panassie's *Le jazz Hot*)—what could be more characteristic or revelatory?

Then there was our education, which sacrificed the interests of the one able man to the unwilling 'necessities' of ten boobs. We understood this very well at the time, we read Flexner's *Universities*, and our best teachers felt as we did and he did. An athlete myself (if not a very successful one), I never resented and detested the system³ of college athletics as most intellectuals did; but nothing could have been more acute than my sense, for four years in preparatory school (I skipped the Sixth Form) and three & a half years in college (I was thrown out for half a year), that I was *wasting my time*. French seemed to us typical: you studied it for eight years, or six years, and at the end you could

² Berryman adds the following note in the margin: "(Joyce's expatriate shadow hung over us all.) Lardner showed us as vicious as well as idiotic: what *dignity* was possible? Congress & 42nd Street."

³ Margin note: "institution"

hardly read it, you could hardly write it, you could hardly speak it, and French films were hell to understand. I studied, in a course called Contemporary civilization [sic], the NRA till I was blue in the face; and immediately it was all swept away, my knowledge not more relevant than a comparable knowledge of Cretan coinage.

Again: I am not arguing a case! I am trying to discover what it is that we feel, and why we feel as we do. American experience must be so various that I can't safely push out fear from myself; the reader must do that; but in order to do that he must know where I am. The sense of *place* is fundamental, and a weakness in Miss McCarthy's essay is her failure ever to say what part of American she knows and means, at what time. Thus for many years I lived in New York or expected to return to it to live, and could not imagine living anywhere else: I suppose I liked the city, or loved it. I don't know, though it still seems to me (for personal reasons) more or less indispensable. But the creation and decline of that feeling, except in the degree that it was pure accident, is material to my present sense of "America" altogether. How much of America do I know? Oklahoma, Florida, Arkansas, Minnesota, New York, Long Island, Connecticut, Baltimore, Michigan and Detroit, Massachusetts and Boston and Cambridge and the Cape, Princeton. In these places I have lived my whole life except for two years in England and on the Continent just before the War. Other places I have visited, even for some time,—Washington D. C., Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Texas—but these hardly count. My experience of New England, which strikes me as counting heavily in my whole experience, was only four years at school there, and three years much later teaching at Harvard. Observe that neither the Pioneer nor the Immigrant nor the Settled plays any immediate part in my heritage. I was born in Oklahoma of a northern farmer and a southern mother, both families long and wholly American (English stock chiefly, some Irish, some Scotch [sic], some German blood), neither having any relation what ever to the State of my birth,—where my father had gone shortly before I was born, to take over a bank. His family were Catholic, and he nominally was, so that I was raised one, became very devout, and had thus my first experience as a member of a minority group. But it was my mother's family with which everything else worked to identify me. They had been a landowning [sic] and slave-holding family in Tennessee, trained all as lawyers before the Civil War; my great grand-father had been a brigadier and was exiled to British Honduras after the War—the War seemed close to my childhood, partly because I spent much time with his daughter my grandmother. The country was raw when I was born in 1914, and not less so when we left in 1926 for the mad real estate

boom and crash of Florida, and I have never been back nor met since anyone I knew there. So much for a discontinuity rather common than unusual in American life. Tampa gave me my first urban life: someone we knew killed himself every week over his losses; heavy drinking, fast driving, broken families. Five times I changed schools before I went to South Kent, losing & skipping grades, bored with the work, adored by the teachers, learning nothing, encouraged in cureless laziness. Glasses made me a “sissy”, I was not large ever in my class, and a mediocre fighter. Alternations of honours and bullying, which worse I don’t know.

It’s not that America is not cultured: it is the existence here of an organized and powerful anti-intellectual culture, or quasi-culture,—of which the play reviewers in New York are an even better example than the men who purvey the plays they review. And the difficulty of the line (a matter Europeans find it hard to understand): for instance *The New Yorker*, slick, wealthy, fashionable, entirely up on cultural events, and contemptuous only of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov, Kierkegaard, and Robert Lowell, which nevertheless gladly prints the worst work of Auden, Carlos Williams, Isherwood, Mary McCarthy etc etc. It is confusing, “How excessively confusing and distracting”, one becomes *suspicious*, and uses up in keeping matters straight, energy needed for other concerns.

Then the ads, our daily experience of which cultivates our disdain, our resistance, our incredulity, our *suspiciousness*. The Disinterested is less and less easily discovered. One does not praise anything or nothing, Americans learn. Everyone has something to sell, a horn to blow. An important new poet is recognized as such, elaborately, by one of the best contemporary critics—and three people told me during the weeks after his article appeared that the critic, realizing that his own poetic gift was weak, hoped to ride to fame on the coattails of his friend. This is so common that the old words (*canard*, etc) have dropped out of use. Envy riots, and imputation of baseness, and a levelling cynicism.

I have not been in Spain; but reports of people who have, and the literature of and about Spain, suggest to me that national feeling is very strong there, natural and strong. Can we imagine a national song-hit “I Love Madrid” sweeping the peninsula, or multitudes gathered in Madrid and Barcelona to celebrate “I am a Spaniard” Day? Imperfectly, I think. Only *foreigners* act so, and it is those who feel themselves foreigners still in America, recent immigrant stock or refugees, who passion over “America”; or frauds. Perhaps those only who keep their mouths shut love their country.

American *pleonexia*.⁴ How difficult it would be to try, and how little anyone would think of trying, to institute here an ideal of moderation (except under necessity, shortages, etc).

Our insane faith in *progress* as such, clearly material progress (cite Schnabel on autos, & instance The Bomb as an obvious end of this faith) and immaterial progress such as *education* (though not in *qualities*, and so our education is time-served).

'Honour' in modern American life???. Who is our gentleman? *All* are, we think, but why is any one? In fact, no one is. Our ideal Go-getter. The prestige of the newspaperman, as against the prestige of the man of letters, the artist, the professor. Our contempt for our politicians (justified, in fact, but how unlucky that we sh[oul]d regularly despise our leaders—does any other country offer a parallel situation? In a tribe, the Chief and the Medicine Man are *honoured*; what weirdness if they weren't. So are old men. American passion-for-youth, neglect-&-denial of age: knowledge now so fragmented that the concept of Wisdom is forgotten. Analogous contempt for the Father, whom we wish to pass, and of what use is his detailed knowledge to his son? knowledge [sic] of a vanishing world, a technique the son has no interest in, processes now done-for-us [sic] by machines (instance Mother's skill in the kitchen, unnecessary to the apartment Daughter who cooks with *thermometers* etc).

⁴ *Pleonexia*: From the Greek *πλεονεξία*: Covetousness, avarice, greed. (OED).

APPENDIX 2

BEN SHAHN AND *HOMAGE TO MISTRESS BRADSTREET*

Ben Shahn (1898-1969) provided ten illustrations for the first trade edition of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, which was published by Farrar, Straus and Cudahy in 1956, three years after the poem's first appearance in the *Partisan Review* in 1953. Although they have not been reproduced in subsequent editions of Berryman's work, the significance of Shahn's contribution to the first publication of the poem in book-form is indicated on the title-page (below), where the book is clearly presented to the public as a collaborative effort. Three of Shahn's illustrations for the book are reproduced in this Appendix. A more detailed discussion of their significance is provided in Chapter Three.

Homage to
MISTRESS
BRADSTREET

By John Berryman

With Pictures by BEN SHAHN

New York · FARRAR · STRAUS & CUDAHY



Homage to MISTRESS BRADSTREET

... 1

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.



... 17

The winters close, Springs open, no child stirs
under my withering heart, O seasoned heart
God grudged his aid.
All things else soil like a shirt.
Simon is much away. My executive stales.
The town came through for the cartway by the pales;
but my patience is short.
I revolt from, I am like, these savage foresters

... 18

Food endless, people few, all to be done.
As pippins roast, the question of the wolves
turns & turns.
Fangs of a wolf will keep, the neck
round of a child, that child brave. I remember who
in meeting smiled & was punished, and I know who
whispered & was stocked.
We lead a thoughtful life. But Boston's cage we shun.



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This Bibliography is arranged in five main sections, with subsections, according to the following plan:

I. *WORKS BY JOHN BERRYMAN*

A. PUBLISHED

1. POETRY
2. FICTION
3. CRITICISM, ESSAYS, LECTURES, REVIEWS

B. UNPUBLISHED

1. POETRY
2. CRITICISM, ESSAYS, LECTURES, REVIEWS
3. CORRESPONDENCE
 - (a) *Letters written by Berryman*
 - (b) *Letters written to Berryman*

II. *WORKS ON JOHN BERRYMAN*

A. BOOKS

B. ARTICLES, ESSAYS, REVIEWS, PARTS OF BOOKS

C. INTERVIEWS

D. DISSERTATIONS

III. *OTHER CRITICISM*

IV. *MISCELLANEOUS LITERARY WORKS*

V. *BOOKS/ARTICLES IN JOHN BERRYMAN'S PERSONAL LIBRARY*

I. WORKS BY JOHN BERRYMAN

A. PUBLISHED

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V. BOOKS/ARTICLES IN JOHN BERRYMAN'S PERSONAL LIBRARY

This list gives details of texts used in the course of this study that are held in John Berryman's Personal Library at the University of Minnesota. For a comprehensive catalogue of Berryman's library see Kelly, *John Berryman's Personal Library: A Catalogue*, listed in section II.A above.

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