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Autor: Davis, Elizabeth
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Berryman Saved from Drowning

Elizabeth Davis

Throughout the critical literature on John Berryman, including the poet's remarks on his own work, "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet" is identified as the breakthrough in his career. The term implies a view of the career which is roughly contained in William Martz's remark that with this poem "the early Berryman becomes the later Berryman," a man who has achieved "poetic maturity" and, above all, "found his own voice." The early Berryman had not, and had suffered from all the evils of a secondary poet, slave on the one hand to his strong precursors and on the other to an ideal of originality for its own sake, lacking in subject matter, and given over to mannered peculiarities of style.¹ The breakthrough is especially impressive in Berryman's case since, as James Dickey once remarked, he was evidently a poet-made and not a poet-born. What sustained him through the long years of apprentice labor, when the poetry was often simply not good, was as much a commitment to poets as to poetry, a sense of shared calling and shared suffering which finds its supreme expression in the elegies of the Dream Songs.²

¹ William J. Martz, *John Berryman*, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 85 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Press, 1969), p. 34. Martz quotes Randall Jarrell on the early Berryman, pp. 8-9: "Doing things in a style all its own sometimes seems the primary object of the poem, and its subject gets a rather spasmodic treatment." For a provocative discussion of the distinction between "breakthrough" and "success" in Berryman's career see J. M. Linebarger, *John Berryman* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), p. 73.

² Quoted in Peter A. Stitt, "John Berryman: The Dispossessed Poet," *The Ohio Review* 15:2 (Winter 1974), 71. For a relevant discussion of Berryman's elegies see Douglas Dunn, "Gaiety & Lamentation: The Defeat of John Berryman," *Encounter* 43 (August 1974), 73.

"Mistress Bradstreet," suggesting many forms in the course of its fifty-seven verses—invocation, dialogue, narrative, meditation—ends as an elegy.

In the title of the poem we find stated, ostensibly, both its central subject, an historical figure embodying the origin of a poetic tradition, and the contemporary poet's relation to it. In this sense the poem is "about" its own origins and occasion: about the meaning to the poet of a poetic precursor, about the problematic burden of what I would suggest is a specifically American past. In several different interviews and commentaries Berryman gave his own account of the genesis and progress of "Mistress Bradstreet," never substantially changed though often elaborated. One version, from the *Paris Review* interview of 1970:

The situation with that poem was this. I invented the stanza in '48 and wrote the first stanza and the first three lines of the second stanza and then I stuck. ... Then I stuck. I read and read and thought and collected notes and sketched for five years, until, although I was still in the second stanza, I had a mountain of notes and draftings—no whole stanzas, but passages as long as five lines. The whole poem was written in about two months, after which I was a ruin for two years.

Whereas he had been aware in beginning the Dream Songs that he was "embarked on an epic," Berryman says, "in the case of the Bradstreet poem I didn't know." This is something of a blueprint for "breakthrough": the beginning almost automatic, in unconsciousness, the arrest, the long and laborious gestation, the rush of creativity (or if you like, parturition) at the end, the all or nothing risk—two years of exhausted and depleted aftermath. The process is as much psychological as technical, and Berryman cited four "shocks" which set him going, two from life and two from literature. From his life: an operation undergone by his wife (he implies a hysterectomy; Eileen Simpson tells us otherwise), and a devastating experience in group therapy. From literature: a first reading of *The Adventures of Augie March*, which Berryman repeatedly called Bellow's "breakthrough," a rereading of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.³

³ Peter A. Stitt, "The Art of Poetry XVI," *The Paris Review*, 14 (Winter 1972), 195. (Hereafter *Paris Review*) Eileen Simpson's correction of Berryman's version and her own discussion of the origins and composition of the poem appear in her recent memoir, *Poets in Their Youth* (New York: Random House, 1982), Chapter IX, "Mistress Bradstreet," pp. 223–230 especially.

What interests me in this description of what we might call a compositional context is what Berryman omits from it, that is, the work he was engaged in in 1948 when he wrote those initial eleven lines: the sequence, begun in 1947 but not published until twenty years later as *Berryman's Sonnets*, and — in this he was quite drastically blocked—the biography of Stephen Crane which he had been commissioned to write in '45 and which was published in 1950. Each of these is of peculiar significance, I think, to "Mistress Bradstreet."

The connection with the *Sonnets* is the more obvious and has been often remarked. We now know, what very few did in 1953, that in '47 Berryman had an adulterous love affair with a woman named by him "Lise" and wrote a sonnet sequence commemorating it: eroticism, rebellion, defiance, a peculiarly Catholic sense of guilt, longing, a continuing suggestion, evidently picked up by the lady herself, that the whole enterprise exists in order to allow the poet occasion for his sonnets (the last lines of the final 115th announce their own dependence on the beloved's departure) and entry into the often-evoked literary tradition of Petrarch, Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, and so on.⁴ Technically, the sonnets prepared Berryman for the new stanza invented for "Bradstreet" and sustained through great length: they were, in Martz's words, "good practice." But the connection is closer: lines attributed to Lise are now given to Anne Bradstreet (for instance, in 32.5, "I *want* to take you for my lover").⁵ More important, this *secret* fact of the poet's personal and literary life adds special resonance to the title of his public work. A living mistress has departed and has been replaced by a dead poet, Mistress Bradstreet. The poet's relation to the latter is of wooing, really seduction, and in this sense the transformation of Anne Bradstreet in the poem includes the transformation of poet, "historical figure embodying the origin of a tradition," to adulteress.

The connections between the poem and the biography of Crane are subtler but actually, I think, closer. First, the prose work provided as much technical preparation of another sort as the sonnet sequence. It is,

⁴ *Berryman's Sonnets* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973). A recent treatment of the affair and its relation to the sonnets appears in John Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), Chapter 9, "Art and adultery, 1947," pp. 167–196.

⁵ For a fuller discussion of such interconnections see, for example, Joel Connaroe, *John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), pp. 73 ff.

after all, a biography of a dead writer (a fiction writer occasionally a poet; Berryman is a poet occasionally a fiction writer): "Mistress Bradstreet" is, largely, a poetic biography of a dead writer presented as autobiography, or autobiographical monologue. And just as Berryman's poetic style was greatly influenced by Crane's prose (we recall his mention of other prose works as sources of poetic inspiration), so the prose of his own biography, in its occasionally circular or inverted syntax, in its imagery as well, can be heard in the poetic lines.⁶ Second, Berryman's personal identification with Crane was, according to all evidence and accounts, extreme and traumatic, and we will have occasion to consider an even greater identification realized in the Bradstreet poem. Finally, Berryman used his biography as an occasion to make his own, assertive revision of the American literary canon: Crane was in eclipse at this time, and the claims Berryman makes for his value and importance are so great as to have been ridiculed by contemporary reviewers as the most mindless kind of hyperbole.⁷ This project also has something to do with Berryman's choice of Bradstreet as subject; or if, as he claimed, Bradstreet rather chose *him*, then with her service to him as subject.

Before turning to the critical question of the choice of subject, however, I should mention the intersections that exist between these two

⁶ See Simpson pp. 188–89: "And he knew . . . how deeply Crane had entered his own soul. Crane's fiction, rather than his verse, had become a powerful influence on his poetry." She quotes in the same place Graham Greene's objections in a *New Statesman* review to Berryman's "tortured prose."

⁷ Berryman's sensitivity to the whole question of the canon and canon-making is evident throughout the biography and is of sufficiently self-revealing interest to warrant quotation at some length. From the chapter entitled "Crane's Art": "Since Dr. Johnson observed that a century was the term commonly fixed as the test of literary merit, authors have crowded each other out of sight more and more rapidly. The term cannot be now so long. An English critic says the present point is to write a book that will last just ten years; but a decade must be too short — fashion can catch up older trash than that. For Johnson, remember, the 'effects of favour' must have ended. Under our industry of literary scholarship, having to be kept supplied with subjects, survival is a more ambiguous condition than it used to be: one may stand to gain by overvaluing his author however meager, or his author's toe. Other conditions make a term difficult to fix. But Crane has been dead half a century, academic interest has avoided him as both peculiar and undocumented, and some of his work is still decidedly alive. This is long enough." *Stephen Crane* (New York: William Sloan Associates, 1950), p. 263.

projects—the sonnets and the biography—since they do anticipate the central *temporal* “intersection” in the long poem. In Sonnet 22 the poet imagines his mistress Lise “If not in white shorts,” then in another age, the age and milieu of Crane’s youth and more particularly, it seems to me, of his youthful novel *Maggie*. The final two lines contain a reference to “the *Red Badge*/Stevie’s becoming known for” and end with the living lovers’ return to their own time and place: “We drive home.” Sonnet 99 begins: “A murmur of the shallow, Crane/Sees us,” and ends with the question, “Does his wraith watch?” In other words, in the first instance the lovers “visit” the time of Crane; in the second, Crane—both wraith and, in an obvious implicit pun, water-bird—“visits” theirs. Berryman’s imagination of the past (of his literary past, we might say) seems spatial; he thinks in terms of visits, of the *exchange* of visits. The mirror-numbers 22 and 99 cannot, I think, be accidental.

To resume the question of choice: “the question,” as Berryman wrote in 1965, “most put to me about the poem [of] why I chose to write about this boring high-minded Puritan woman who may have been our first American poet but is not a good one.”⁸ Perhaps the answers are suggested by these words. First of all, the Puritans *were* of historical interest to Berryman, and his own role as their historian was of crucial importance to him. (The term “historian,” Whitman’s designation of the poet, is one which Berryman cites with high approval at the expense of Eliot.) He was disgusted that “most critics” failed to recognize this dimension of his work and gratified when Robert Lowell pronounced it “the most resourceful historical poem in our literature.”⁹ And the facts of Bradstreet’s history are convenient. The first edition of her poems published in England in 1650 was entitled *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*; evidently presenting the author as her own Muse, the title is peculiar for its time, but for Berryman’s it seems a delightful anticipation: she is there, a point of origin, for the later poet to invoke.

First and late: here, I would suggest, is a crux in Berryman’s choice of Bradstreet and in his relationship to her. Bradstreet’s position in the American literary canon is as firmly fixed as Crane’s was unstable. In

⁸ “One Answer to a Question: Changes” in *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), p. 328 (Hereafter “One Answer”).

⁹ “Song of Myself: Intention and Substance,” *Freedom*, p. 230; “One Answer,” p. 329.

terms of this canon she has what no other American poet can enjoy, that is, absolute priority. The priority has little or nothing to do with stature or quality:¹⁰ it is based on what one might call the peculiarly American standard of having got there first. It is worth noting that had Berryman wished to discover an historical figure of greater literary stature he had a ready opportunity in Edward Taylor: excitement over the discovery of Taylor's manuscripts was a bare ten years old when Berryman began work, in a milieu where the event itself was of immediate impact. This is not what he wished.

We may speculate, as some critics have already done, that what Berryman wished was, indeed, a bad poet. "The endearing incompetence of her verse" Carol Johnson saw as a major part of her qualification as Muse.¹¹ "All this bald/abstract didactic rime I read appalled" the poet interrupts his *Mistress* in Stanza 12.¹² What, then, appeals? The weakness of Bradstreet as poet tends to some useful displacements of the homage itself. To pay homage to what is an essentially "academic" status of *first* American poet is, considered in a certain light, to *embrace* a burden, the poverty of the American tradition, the raw lowness of its origin, and in celebrating it to render it a blessing. This is in fact a characteristically Puritan strategy which could be applied to everything from religious persecution to the weather, from God's scourges of his chosen to the term Puritan itself. In a powerful sense homage may fill a vacuum or even, as it were, reverse a judgment.¹³ Homage is of course

¹⁰ Feminist critical revision has had its effect on Bradstreet's literary reputation. See for example Ann Stafford, *Anne Bradstreet: The Worldly Puritan* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1974) for a very positive assessment of Bradstreet's stature as a poet. Of especial interest in this context (the influence of Berryman's poem is paramount) is the postscript by Adrienne Rich to her Foreword to an edition of the poems ("Anne Bradstreet and her Poetry," in Jeannine Hensley, ed., *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1967) which appears in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979).

¹¹ Carol Johnson, "John Berryman and Mistress Bradstreet: A Relation of Reason," *Essays in Criticism* 14 (October, 1964), 388.

¹² *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1956). Future quotations will be identified by stanza and line numbers in the text.

¹³ In stressing the peculiarity of the American past, which in effect presents the modern poet with the burden of an absence, I mean implicitly to draw a contrast with, or at least to qualify, the argument put forth by Walter Jackson Bate in *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (London: Chatto & Windus,

also displaced from poetic to other achievement, to the sheer physical survival of a pioneer woman, and more particularly, to that woman's person. She is from across the centuries the object of a sexual conquest which wins her away from her husband and her God and into the role of Muse/mistress. Sexual and literary mastery blend here: the twentieth-century poet's voice has priority in this poem, and from it emerges Bradstreet's, the "sourcing" of his own. Her stature comes from what Johnson has called "her subjection to superior praise," what I would elaborate as containment within a mastering voice which celebrates her priority—historical, hence negligible—while demonstrating its own—poetic, hence central.

This of course is an achievement of the entire poem, but the first "modulation" of the poet's voice into Bradstreet's (identified in Berryman's notes at 4.8) tells much about the initial move towards mastery. From stanza 4:

... When the mouth dies, who misses you?
 Your master never died,
 Simon ah thirty years past you—
 Pockmarkt & westward staring on a haggard deck
 it seems I find you, young. I come to check,
 I come to stay with you,
 and the Governor, & Father, & Simon, & the huddled
 men.

The modulation is evident in the single term "Father," which can only be Anne's; although the "I" of line 7 refers to the poet, the modulation creates some retrospectively ambiguous reverberations: whereas "I come to stay with you" announces the poet's movement back in time to Anne, it may also echo and answer his earlier address to her (3.4), "I think you won't stay," one which follows his first summons of Anne to *his* time. Throughout the poem, indistinct shiftings of reference in the

1971). What Bate describes as "the writer's loss of self-confidence ... [before] the rich heritage of past art and literature" is of course possible to *any* modern poet. But in a strictly national sense I would suggest that the American modern's dilemma is virtually reversed. It would be illuminating to consider in relation to Bate's work Berryman's whole relation to his literary past — less to Bradstreet and the tradition she represents than to his great Anglo-Irish predecessors, of whom he was an enthusiastic hero-worshipper. It is the very richness and complexity of such an inquiry which confines me to this parenthetical, footnoted suggestion.

"I . . . you" relationship create a sort of undertone of variations on the very theme of priority.¹⁴ And there are further ambiguities in this stanza directly related to the theme of mastery. "Your master never died" is peculiar. "Simon ah thirty years past you," in apposition to master, echoes the reference to Simon in 1.1—"The Governor your husband lived so long"—but it also seems to repudiate it: the Governor did, finally, die. Here the timeless or out-of-time poet seems to "enter" the term master (crowding Simon out, as it were); or perhaps to join a series of those who have mastered the early poet by virtue of their aesthetic "care"—to fill a role that has never died. In the end "your Master" may be poetry itself, embodied in the present text.

The replacement of Simon by the poet (and poetry) has earlier begun. The assurance of 1.8—"Simon will listen while you read a Song"—is doubtfully contradicted in the following stanza, which we must cite in full.

Outside the New World winters in grand dark
 White air lashing high thro' the virgin stands
 foxes down foxholes sigh,
 surely the English heart quails, stunned.
 I doubt if Simon than this blast, that sea,
 spares from his rigour for your poetry
 more. We are on each other's hands
 who care. Both of our worlds unhand us. Lie stark.

The identification of Simon with the New England winter goes further than the rigorous deafness of each. We cannot ignore the strongly sexual overtones of lines 2–4: an evocation of winter; a suggestion of the shock of a ravished bride. There is also another sort of sexual possi-

¹⁴ In "One Answer" Berryman wrote, pp. 326–27: "The discovery here ["The Ball Poem"] was that a commitment of identity can be 'reserved,' so to speak, with an ambiguous pronoun. The poet himself is both left out and put in; the boy does and does not become him and we are confronted with a process which is at once a process of life and a process of art. A pronoun may seem a small matter, but she matters, he matters, it matters, they matter. Without this invention (if it is one — Rimbaud's '*Je est un autre*' may have pointed my way, I have no idea now) I could not have written either of the two long poems that constitute the bulk of my work so far. If I were making a grandiose claim, I might pretend to know more about the administration of pronouns than any other living poet writing in English or American." Berryman continued to make such grandiose claims; see for instance William Heyen, "John Berryman: A Memoir and an Interview," *The Ohio Review* 15:2 (Winter 1974), 61–62.

bility, that is, of castration, in "Both of our worlds unhande'd us" to which I should like to return later. What I would suggest here is that literary mastery, apparently distinguished from the sexual in these lines (or, as in "Lie stark," frankly equated with it) is covertly associated with a different, somehow maimed sexuality that is shared by both true master and mastered.

To return to the modulating line of Stanza 4: the trio of authority in "the Governor, & Father, & Simon" contains peculiarities which anticipate a major aspect of Anne's narrative. The Governor, we know from both logic and history, can only be Winthrop, but the term is abstract and the only previous reference to The Governor has been to Simon (1.1). Curiously enough, Anne's father Thomas Dudley was also (after Winthrop, before Simon) Governor of Massachusetts. In other words, although the title in this context refers to one individual, it might refer to the other two named. Again, the abstraction of the reference to Father—admittedly, an intimate form of address which serves to distinguish the daughter/speaker—nevertheless permits a suggestion of the divine Father, as it also extends our sense of an interchangeability, or at least changeability, of title. The effect is rather of a *mélange*, from which emerges one image of thrice-fortified (patriarchal) Authority whose loftiness is accentuated further (even typographically) by the presence of "the huddled men."

One other telling example of this effect as it is sustained in the poem: in Stanza 12 the poet interrupts Anne's description of her tireless "Versing" to question her motive (line 5)—"To please your wintry father?" The lower case would suggest Thomas Dudley; the nature of the "abstract didactic rime," indeed of all Puritan verse, would suggest the Lord; the adjective "wintry" is Simon's. In fact, some reproach of Simon for being more a wintry father than a lover/husband may be implicit in the poet's rather testy attack on Anne as artist: "mistress neither of fiery nor velvet verse, on your knees/hopeful & shamefast, chaste, laborious, odd" (12.8, 13.1), if we take mistress in a double sense and chaste in an anachronistically narrow (e.g. virginal) one—both possibilities of the poet's "modern" voice.¹⁵ In this instance Anne replies with an admission of past repinings, carried forward into present rebellion, against her God (13.8: "I found my heart more carnal and sitting

¹⁵ Berryman's description of the two voices and their relation, and of his determination to avoid "pastiche," appears in Heyen, *loc. cit.*

loose from God”), her husband (14.4: “so-much-older Simon”), and her father (14.5: “so Father smiled”), united in the collective entity suggested in her phrase “Their will be done.”

The “mastery” which Berryman’s poem enacts depends, I would suggest, on the continuing presence, and subversion, of such a trinitarian “master-figure” combining the Puritan God (or such earthly agents of Divine power as John Cotton), the human father (or such public agents of patriarchal authority as the Governor), and the husband. And from the latter figure the expected sexual power or authority is eventually removed—appropriated, as I suggested above, by the seducer/poet who simultaneously transforms the nature of sexual mastery and identifies it with the explicitly *poetic*.

The nature of the appropriation is itself extremely complex. As we noticed of Stanza 2, the traditionally virile or aggressive sexual imagery associated with Simon is apparently left intact, while the poet appears associated with images perhaps emasculated or “feminized”; later, he comes forth “weak as a child,/tender & empty, doomed, quick to no tryst” (25.4–5). Such images of the poet suggest not just the child, I think, but the child victimized, doomed by the Father to annihilation. I am intrigued by the climactic detail Berryman selected for Anne’s opening (and historically accurate) narrative of Stanzas 5 and 6, that is, the drowning of “young Henry Winthrop,” son of the Governor of 4.8. Although one could argue that the proleptic appearance of a Henry in Berryman’s work can only be coincidental,¹⁶ the poet’s later lament, which occurs during the central dialogue with Anne wherein he likens himself to a child—“I am drowning in this past”—seems to me to point squarely to identification with the drowned son. Berryman’s life-long obsession with a (possibly apocryphal) incident when his own suicidal father threatened to drown him may lie behind the association.¹⁷ Let us consider entire this crucial section of the poem, the stanzas following on Anne’s bidding the poet to “Sing a concord of our thought,” which conclude their final dialogue.

¹⁶ Although Berryman gave his own account of the origin of Henry in a joke shared with his second wife, we must note (as he himself did) the prominence of the name in Crane’s fiction: Henry Fleming of *The Red Badge of Courage*, for instance, Henry Johnson of “The Monster.” See also *Paris Review*, p. 195.

¹⁷ See Simpson, pp. 60–61. Haffenden refers to the incident, pp. 24–26 *et passim*.

—Wan dolls in indigo on gold: refrain
 my western lust. I am drowning in this past.
 I lose sight of you
 who mistress me from air. Unbraced
 in delirium of the grand depths, giving away
 haunters what kept me, I breathe solid spray.
 —I am losing you.
 Straiten me on.—I suffered living like a stain:

I trundle the bodies, on the iron bars,
 over that fire backward & forth; they burn—
 bits fall. I wonder if
 I killed them. Women serve my turn.
 —Dreams! You are good.—No.—Dense with
 hardihood
 the wicked are dislodged, and lodged the good.
 In green space we are safe.
 God awaits us (but I am yielding) who Hell wars.

Stanzas 33 and 34 are composed not of "concord," but of symbolic oppositions among the elements (earth, air, fire, and water) and between the temporal realms of history and eternity or, if we like, of the secular and the Divine. Again, in subtle contradiction of concord, the poet's associations seem as much private and personal as traditional. In the timeless realm of air, the mistress/Muse Anne is joined to the Virgin Mother evoked by the Byzantine dolls (see Berryman's note to 33.1). "Drowning in this past" he prays to her for rescue. The "grand depths," both formless and yet "solid," suggest here a contrastingly secular and annihilating world of history. Like a delirious diver (see note to 33.5-6) he divests himself of "what kept me"—the female Spirit evoked above. Thus Anne's interruption "—I am losing you!" The depths are also implicitly masculine, for "*this* past" in which the poet is drowning is not, we realize in the end, the past of Anne who is losing him, from whom he is slipping away. Just as the drowning-image contains a seminal element of Berryman's autobiographical myth, so the poet's admission prepares the way for the sole, strictly self-referential or "autobiographical" confession in the long poem: "I suffered living like a stain." Whereas the simple past tense here places the poet in a "post-humous" mode (reviewing a life completed), the present tense in which he continues (34.1-4) calls forth the obsessive repetition of *dream*. (The subtle irony of Anne's consoling "Dreams! You are good" depends on an alteration of meaning, from dream as psychic reality to dream as idle

phantom, which must be incomplete.) Interior and exterior histories merge here. The infernal image of 34.1–4 is at once radically interior and personal, in this dream sense, and wholly appropriate to the mid-century experience of war and holocaust. The strangely effective “Women serve my turn,” both confession and threat, operates in a different sort of present. A seeming shift of reference from the dream-world to the ongoing circumstances of the “actual” life, the line jolts us into a revision of this poem, of the poet’s relation to his subject. The emphatic opposition of the poet to the general “women” underlines, I think, a major aspect of the confession. Guilty within all these masculine spheres, of private and public history, of literary act, he is in a more fundamental sense *guilty of* the masculine. The poet’s ventriloquist-identification with the Puritan woman is a self-rescue from the annihilating depths of the personal (time- and gender-bound) self and to its limitations as poetic subject.

Anne’s answering image of consolation weds the eternal realm of faith with the spatial particularity (“dislodged ... lodged”) of the “green space” earth. But her consolation or absolution of the poet must be imperfect “(but I am yielding)” and it calls forth his own final confession of no-faith.

— I cannot feel myself God waits. He flies
nearer a kindly world; or he is flown.
One Saturday’s rescue
won’t show. Man is entirely alone
may be. I am a man of griefs & fits
trying to be my friend. And the brown smock splits,
down the pale flesh a gash
broadens and Time holds up your heart against my
eyes.

The sky—the realm of air—is empty, God is flown. But the earth, which is the woman’s body, contains its own eternal spirit, which is joined to the poet’s. The effect of the stanza’s final three lines is multiple. In “Time holds up your heart *against* my eyes” we sense not so much a hungering vision filled as rather a blank one *screened*. The image is of shielding: the sky may remain as empty and godless as ever “in the present,” but the poet has transformed time, consciousness, “heart,” and is protected from that void. The image also recalls to me strongly the childbirth-stanza 19, “inverted” as it were. In this sense the poet is more than shielded by the mother-figure; he is able to “enter” her, not

as lover but as offspring returned to its source. Poetically, identification is complete, and the voice of Anne continues uninterrupted through the close (Stanza 53) of the narrative part of the poem.

Such a reading of "Mistress Bradstreet," wherein the poet usurps and replaces the father-husband, drowns or is emasculated as the son, and *becomes* the mother, may approach "intra-poetic relationships as parallels of family romance" in a manner rather too literal for criticism.¹⁸ But Berryman's own invitations to such readings remain provocative, even imperative.

The idea was not to take Anne Bradstreet as a poetess—I was not interested in that. I was interested in her as a pioneer heroine, a sort of mother to the artists and intellectuals who would follow her and play a large role in the development of the nation. People like Jefferson, Poe, and me.¹⁹

This is the hindsight of Berryman post *Dream Songs*, supplemented by the now heart-wrenching note of March, 1971 (after the final phrase quoted above) "Get the delusion." As he and his various biographers tell us, Berryman evidently organized his own, let's say psychoanalytic, version of his life—and of its poetic record *The Dream Songs* (his "Song of Myself")—in relation to the fact of his father's suicide. According to Kenneth Connelly,

This fact hangs like a fatal curse over the poem from beginning to end, dramatizing Henry's sense of rootlessness and confusion, heightening the temptation of death, and confronting him with the challenge not to betray his children as he has been betrayed.²⁰

With the benefit of our own hindsight we might view the poet's strategy in "Mistress Bradstreet," to identify with or become the mother, as an earlier, somehow liberating response to this parental challenge. In so becoming, the poet enables himself to rectify or reverse whatever inadequacies the maternal figure may suffer (or inflict) as precursor—a term we may take, I believe, in both familial and literary senses. To view Berryman's strategy in this way is, however, to render

¹⁸ The allusion is to Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 8. The extent to which the example and directives of this work might complicate the inquiry suggested above (note 13) must be taken as understood but, again, cannot be pursued here.

¹⁹ *Paris Review*, p. 195.

²⁰ Kenneth Connelly, "Henry Pussycat. He Come Home Good," *Yale Review* 58 (Spring 1969), 424.

still more problematic the very notion of "mastery" which I've sought to explore.

Let us return to the point of identification with Bradstreet with which Berryman himself begins:

We are on each others' hands
who care. Both of our worlds unhande'd us.

"One point of connection" between himself and his subject, as Berryman remarked, "being the almost insuperable difficulty of writing high verse in a land that cared and cares so little for it," the hint of emasculation in "unhande'd" which I mentioned above is in keeping with the attitude of weakness and rejection in which each poet stands in relation to his community and culture. And the suggestion is equally appropriate to the different and opposite ways the two are unhande'd by their respective worlds. In Puritan New England Bradstreet's writing was unwomanly, masculine. In Berryman's twentieth-century America, to be a poet—he had occasion to deplore this himself—was to be unmanne'd, feminized.²¹ Given such sexual reversal, implicit in the very figure of the American poet, the seventeenth-century mother appears a kind of "weak father" to the twentieth-century offspring. It is the complex fate of the latter, the drama which "Mistress Bradstreet" enacts, that he must master, embrace, become, "complete" such a problematic precursor.

"A poem's force," Berryman wrote in 1965 (placing himself, to my mind, somewhere between Ernest Hemingway and Harold Bloom) "may be pivoted on a missing or misrepresented element in an agreed-upon or imposed design."²² Having begun my account of his breakthrough-poem by examining some elements missing from the poet's own account of its origins, let me conclude by proposing—in the spirit of Bloom's call for an "antithetical criticism"—an alternative, only superficially absent "strong" father to the work: that is, the Hawthorne of

²¹ For instance in Jane Howard, "Whisky and Ink, Whisky and Ink," *Life* (July 21, 1967), 74, the complaint is paired with a telling indignation about the country's lack of *historical* sense: "Berryman resents the fact that in the U. S. poetry is considered effeminate, and finds it shameful that 'no national memory but ours could forget the fact that John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both died on the same day — the fourth of July in 1826.'"

²² "One Answer," p. 327.

The Scarlet Letter. According to Bloom, the American poet differs notably from the British in his relation to the father:

It seems true that British poets swerve from their precursors while American poets labor rather to "complete" their fathers. The British are more genuinely revisionists of one another, but we (or at least most of our post-Emersonian poets) tend to see our fathers as not having dared enough.²³

Berryman, in the course of his acknowledgment of a Russian novelist's immediate influence on "Mistress Bradstreet," remarks in passing on his "own" literary tradition:

The only woman in American literature is Hester Prynne, and she is very good. I have great respect for her and the book, but Mistress Bradstreet is much more ambitious. It is very unlikely that it is better, but it attempts more.²⁴

Hawthorne, in his ironically truthful, seriously fictive account of himself and the origins of his Romance, "The Custom House":

While thus perplexed,—and cogitating, among other hypotheses, whether the letter might not have been one of those decorations which the white men used to contrive, in order to take the eyes of Indians,—I happened to place it on my breast. It seemed to me,—the reader may smile but must not doubt my word,—it seemed to me, then, that I experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat; and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron. I shuddered, and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor.²⁵

And Berryman's poetic "reply," which we have already had occasion to consider:

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

²³ Bloom, p. 68.

²⁴ *Paris Review*, p. 197. Berryman also added to this remark the later footnote, "Get the delusion." When Berryman makes his claims for Crane's status as "master," the only American writers he names in comparison are Hawthorne and James. See *Stephen Crane*, pp. 283, 285.

²⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter. An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*, ed. S. Bradley et al. (W. W. Norton, 1978), o. 28.

²⁶ "One Answer," p. 328.

The surface connections between Berryman's Bradstreet and Hester Prynne are clear enough. I do not believe it is possible to link the terms "Puritan" and "adulteress" and *not* to think of Hawthorne's character: she is, as it were, the original. The "series of rebellions" which Berryman described as marking the theme of the poem — "each rebellion, of course . . . succeeded by a submission" — is very much the pattern of Hester's career. Indeed, the character described in Chapter XIII, "Another View of Hester," who, had it not been for her child, "might have come down to us in history, hand in hand with Anne Hutchinson, as the foundress of a religious sect . . . [who] might, and not improbably would, have suffered death from the stern tribunals of the period, for attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment" carries rebellion, albeit speculative, to what would seem to be its limit. Inventing, Berryman makes Anne Hutchinson a friend of his Anne.²⁷ Given such links, Berryman's reference to Hester Prynne in the *Paris Review* interview seems inevitable.

But there are other, deeper connections which I think his more enthusiastic concern in that interview with Augie March and Anna Karenina may actively work to obscure. *The Scarlet Letter* is, after all, a fiction "about" its own and its author's precursors, about the burden of its American past. It represents in Hawthorne's work — in addition to being what we might call his own "breakthrough" — the synthesis of his active involvement with history with his great theme of inherited guilt, of the nature of good and evil *in historical time*, of the problematic relation of son to father explored in terms equally ambiguous of progress or declension.²⁸ In one sense Hawthorne confronts or comes to

²⁷ Hawthorne, p. 119. Anne Hutchinson's appearance in "Mistress Bradstreet" is worth remarking further. In the following lines — "Now Mistress Hutchinson rings forth a call —/should she? many creep out at a broken wall—/affirming the Holy Ghost/dwells in one justified. Factioning passion blinds/all to all her good, all — can she be exiled?/Bitter sister, victim! I miss you./— I miss you, Anne/day or night weak as a child,/tender & empty, doomed, quick to no tryst." (24.6.–8, 21.1–5) — we notice that the climactic line in which Anne Bradstreet misses her sister victim serves as the occasion of the poet's interrupting to offer himself as *substitute*; the two possibilities, equivalent or alternative to "sister, victim," remain open.

²⁸ One of the most striking instances in Hawthorne's work of this theme's surfacing to the point of self-reference occurs in the chapter "The Procession," which describes the symbolic pageant of soldiers, magistrates and churchmen before the assembled townspeople and marginals (Indians, sailors, one could

terms with the "stern and black-browed Puritans" evoked in "The Custom House" by assuming the badge or brand of the woman they victimized. It may be that the "Custom House" narrator's involuntary dropping of that brand symbolized for Berryman, as it has for other readers, a failure on Hawthorne's part of full, sympathetic identification with his heroine; his own ambition to "attempt more" seems to lie in this area. Berryman, as we've seen, enters or becomes the person of a woman doubly victimized: in the past by the hostile new world (which still victimizes him, through indifference and neglect); in the present by the poet himself, whose turn women serve.

What we must ask ourselves in the end is what is the nature of this second victimization: what turn *is* served for the poet? And here I think the perspective of *The Scarlet Letter* as precursor is most valuable, for from that perspective we can see, what may otherwise be less clear, the extent to which "Mistress Bradstreet" expresses, if not a yearning for religious faith, then a piercing lament at its loss and an attempt, through poetry, somehow to overcome it.

Let us recall briefly the trinitarian master-figure whose presence in "Mistress Bradstreet" serves the purpose of Anne's mild rebellion and the poet's subtler subversion. In a rather curious note on the composition of the poem Berryman, recalling "three occasions of special heat," mentions finally the "pleasant moment . . . when one night, hugging myself, I decided that her fierce dogmatic old father was going to die blaspheming, in delirium."²⁹ A clear enough gesture, it seems to me, of Oedipal rebellion (the image of Berryman hugging himself is mischiev-

add Hester, the author himself) on the day of the Governor's inauguration. In the course of an evidently rueful celebration of the spectacle the author remarks: "It was an age when what we call talent had far less consideration than now, but the massive materials which produce stability and dignity of character a great deal more. The people possessed, by hereditary right, the quality of reverence; which, in their descendants, if it survive at all, exists in smaller proportion, and with a vastly diminished force in the selection and estimate of public men. The change may be for good or ill, and is partly, perhaps, for both." Placing himself in the scene as a "thoughtful observer" (as is Hester), he places himself temporally as well at the end of a strain fostered by men "distinguished by a ponderous sobriety, rather than activity of intellect" (happily, for our purposes, the first of these men named is Anne's husband, Simon Bradstreet). His is the talent, the intellect unrecognized then; theirs the reverence unpossessed now — departed "for good or ill . . . for both," pp. 168-69.

²⁹ "One Answer," p. 329.

ous and *boyish*), and an interesting conjunction of this conflict with the very issue of faith. But there is also, I would hazard, an element of self-identification with the old man dying in delirium by the poet "Unbraced/in delirium of the grand depths, giving away/haunters what kept me." In this sense the death is a kind of appropriation: I (poet) shall deprive you of your proper death and you (Father) shall suffer the death to which *I* am doomed.

But what we notice almost immediately in the poem, especially of the climactic confession of Stanza 35 and those that follow, is that such processes as rebellion and subversion are incomplete; indeed, they are ultimately reversed. The woman's "submission" is rather a triumph of achieved or *re*achieved faith (Stanzas 37–39) which emphasizes as much as it cures the gulf between her and her modern suitor. The interest of Anne's "bald/abstract didactic rime" must in the end be for him, more than its historical priority, its motivating subject: a "real" God Who is at the ontological center of her world and work. The dilemma of the modern poet of no-faith is that the motivating subject of his work must either be the self-swallowing abyss of his personal past or — if external to him — then lie in the faith of *another*. In so far as "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet" celebrates the faith of the subject, it acknowledges a doubly secondary quality in itself. And against this secondary status the poet's strategy again seems to be one of appropriation. By making Anne Bradstreet the object of *his* faith and worship (and the subject of his poem) the poet empties the sky of her own God.

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

During the composition of "Mistress Bradstreet," Eileen Simpson writes, Berryman, "in a state of manic excitement," was convinced that "he was having a religious experience, was on the point of conversion." He rid himself of the delusion, it seems, during a visit to the devoutly Catholic poet Robert Fitzgerald. Afterwards, the work went on in an atmosphere of even greater "nightmare."³⁰

³⁰ Simpson, pp. 227–229. The last years of Berryman's life were marked by religious 'conversions' evidently willed, evidently failed in the end. Although the "great loss" Berryman located at the center of his life and of his character Henry is rightly taken to be that of the father by suicide, it is also true that from that event Berryman also dates — as he does in the *Paris Review* interview —

It may be that we gain some insight into the quality of this nightmare through contrast. In Chapter V of *The Scarlet Letter*, "Hester at Her Needle," we find a long passage on the effects on Hester's imagination of the "strange and solitary anguish of her life" in which our sense of an authorial self-reflexion is particularly strong. The effects themselves touch on Hawthorne's central themes — the evil of isolation from the community of men, the very different evils, of which Hester's "new sense" has given her appalled revelation, of the community of guilt which all men share. The "loss of faith [which] is ever one of the saddest results of sin" is here, for Hester, a loss of faith not in God but in her fellow men; and it is a threatened or remembered loss, we sense, which the author himself struggles through by means of his character. It is at this point in the text that we are reminded of the symbolic moment recounted in "The Custom House":

The vulgar, who, in those dreary old times, were always contributing a grotesque horror to what interested their imaginations, had a story about the scarlet letter which we might readily work up into a terrific legend. They averred, that the symbol was not mere scarlet cloth, tinged in an earthly dye-pot, but was red-hot with infernal fire, and could be seen glowing all alight, whenever Hester Prynne walked abroad in the night-time. And we must needs say, it seared Hester's bosom so deeply, that perhaps there was more truth in the rumor than our modern incredulity may be inclined to admit.³¹

Just as his reference to the "*dreary old times*" is decidedly ironic, so the author's apparent participation in "our modern incredulity" must be read aslant. In his relation to this incredulity or lack of faith, *and to the heroine who anticipates it*, it may well be that Hawthorne enjoyed a greater freedom of the poet than his "dispossessed" literary descendant. His actual possession of the Puritan past (strong traits of his ancestors' nature have intertwined themselves with his) permits him a rather privileged balance in the nineteenth-century present vis-à-vis both the

the loss of his intense, boyhood faith. The faith was devoutly Catholic, and Berryman's late attempt to embrace Judaism, like his earlier embrace of Calvinist Anne Bradstreet, suggests a search not just for faith but for orthodoxy. (One wonders about Berryman's reactions to the Catholic conversion of his friend Lowell, child of the Puritans; the situation seems oddly to mirror his own.) "The Bradstreet poem is very learned. There is a lot of theology in it," Berryman said in the *Paris Review* interview (p. 183). He meant it in the most serious sense, and we do him and the poem an injustice to psychologize it away.

³¹ Hawthorne, p. 67.

past and the future. In feeling the former as a solid and weighty burden, in both participating in and liberating himself from it through Hester, Hawthorne permits himself an anticipation of the future which, if tainted with skepticism and irony, is nevertheless genuine and genuinely earned.

The "more" that Berryman's poem attempts seems to me, finally, a foredoomed willing-into-being of a burdensome past (the "present" of Anne's world against which she rebels, to which she finally submits) the real burden of which is its quality of absence. Thus, extreme identification with his heroine represents an attempted appropriation of a past from which he is — by the very fact of a literary ancestor like Hawthorne — all the more displaced. But the very hopelessness of the effort is the extraordinary power of "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet." This is a poem which celebrates impossibilities. The impossibility of living in the faithless void of the present time, the impossibility of being an American poet at all — these are celebrated in this most American of poems in verse Berryman equalled but never surpassed. And it is the nearly impossible intensity of the poet's emotion — need, rage, longing, grief — that this verse contains, and that his Muse/mistress/subject is able to embody. Anne Bradstreet could, paradoxically, embody for Berryman the very weaknesses and absences from which his poetic effort had hitherto suffered — his breakthrough, at what he described as enormous cost; thereafter, *The Dream Songs* and Henry.