

# **Representations of Christianity in the Works of John Berryman**

Volume 1

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## Summary

This thesis describes the representation of Christianity in the writings of John Berryman—his struggle with the faith being the most central and incessant preoccupation of his verse. Focussing on each major stage of his artistic development in turn, I demonstrate how its depiction is influenced by biographical factors, his scholarship and sources, and his evolving poetic style. In *The Dispossessed* the issue of faith is evident, but obscured; however, much of his unpublished verse of the period is characterised by a more transparent confessional idiom, frequently expressing his dilemma of conscience over the question of religious commitment. His failure to develop an effective poetic voice is the main reason why his religious poetry of the 1930s and 1940s remained in the private sphere. He achieved his stylistic breakthrough with *Berryman's Sonnets*, where the struggle with his conscience is depicted as a religious conflict, in which his adultery means a confrontation with the Law of God.

*Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* features a more developed representation of a similar conflict; the two alternative life choices before him are personified in the characters of Anne Bradstreet and the 'poet'. Difficulties of faith continue to play a major role in *The Dream Songs*, where the poet, adopting the persona of Henry, directly confronts God and Christianity with the problem of evil and the historical quest for Jesus. His poetry portrays a perceived conflict between faith and reason, and an intellectual pursuit for the truth epitomised by his poem 'The Search'. However, the poet's 'conversion experience' during the composition of *Love & Fame* is depicted as a response to the direct intervention of God in his life. His subsequent devotional poetry is dominated by his new sense of relationship with the 'God of Rescue', who increasingly becomes associated with the full Christian conception of Jesus Christ the Saviour.

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'Similarly motivated men, both of the past & of the present,  
together with their achieved insights,  
*waren die unverlierbaren Freunde*' —the unloseable friends.

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## Introduction

For John Berryman (1914-1972), Christianity—particularly the question of whether it represents the true faith and meaning of life—is one of the most persistent and increasingly prominent thematic concerns of his verse. However, up to now, this area of Berryman studies has received relatively little critical attention. This thesis attempts to redress this lacuna, demonstrating the evolving portrayal of the faith in his poetry and other writings, and its interaction with his teaching and scholarship. In broad terms, his attitude towards Christianity developed from one of scepticism to one of orthodox Catholic belief. However, the poet always remained highly eclectic in his sources, and, as his poems reveal, he could be surprisingly orthodox when he gave the impression of being unorthodox, and vice versa. As such, his religious poetry portrays an individual's sincere, and often problematic, struggle to ascertain religious truth.

The broad account of Berryman's relationship with Christianity, particularly the Catholic faith, is one that the reader may regard as being readily discernible from his published poetry. He is the devout, wide-eyed altar boy who dramatically loses his faith at twelve following his father's suicide; he becomes the lost apostate who confronts God with rebellious theological disputations in *The Dream Songs*, whilst his erratic life, marked by alcoholism and adultery, becomes a vicious circle of self-affliction and despair; finally, at his lowest point, he experiences a dramatic religious conversion, believing that the 'God of Rescue' has directly intervened in his life, which prompts a return to the Catholicism of his youth.

It is a classic prodigal-son narrative that he retrospectively fosters in *Love & Fame* and *Delusions, etc.*, and one that is not altogether unrepresentative of his experiences. But

there is also a more nuanced narrative apparent in his published works as a whole, which suggests that the faith never really left him; rather, that more potent and sustained episodes of doubt brought the conflict, and the search for its resolution, to the fore of poetic expression. These episodes both coincide with, and seemed to have been a significant influence on, his major poetic works—*Berryman's Sonnets*, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, *The Dream Songs*—and give way to the (sometimes ambiguous) expressions of belief in his final two collections. Furthermore, a significant corpus of unpublished material reveals that while he was writing *The Dispossessed* questions of faith were as urgent to the poet as they were during the more manifest periods of religious preoccupation.

### **An 'Autobiography-in-Verse'?**

The history of Berryman's religious beliefs and practices—to a large extent represented in his late poetry—requires some biographical exposition. He often associates his lost faith with the comparative contentment of his childhood, before it was shattered by the tragedy which over-shadowed the rest of his life. His natural father, John Allyn Smith, was a Catholic; and his mother Martha Shaver Smith, an Episcopalian, was also received into the Catholic Church upon their marriage.<sup>1</sup> The poet provides a concise account of his subsequent upbringing, and his eventual fall away from the faith, in an interview (July 1970) with Peter Stitt:

I had a strict Catholic training. I went to a Catholic school and I adored my priest, Father Boniface. I began serving Mass under him at the age of five, and I used to serve six days a week. Often there would be nobody in the church except him and me. Then all that went to pieces at my father's death, when I was twelve. Later, I went to a High

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<sup>1</sup> John Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p.18.

Church Episcopalian school in Connecticut, called South Kent, and I was very fond of the Chaplain there. His name was Father Kemmis, and, although I didn't feel the same way about him as I had about Father Boniface as a child, I still felt very keen, and was a rapt Episcopalian for several years. Then, when I went to Columbia, all that sort of dropped out. I never lost the sense of God in the two roles of creator and sustainer—of the mind of man and all its operations, as a source of inspiration to great artists, saints, great statesmen.<sup>2</sup>

The image of his altar boy days is one that recurs many times in his mature poetry, evoking the trusting faith he once had in God and the Church. It is not only the faith itself which he yearns to recapture, however; it is also the sense of existential harmony and childhood innocence which accompanied it. This is illustrated in the following uncollected Dream Song, written in 1968, which depicts the persona Henry mournfully reflecting on the contrasting outlooks which his life, through time, has come to represent:

Long (my dear) ago, when rosaries  
based Henry's vaulting thought, at seven & six,  
Henry perceived in the sky  
your form amidst his stars. He fought to please  
you & God daily. Seldom wicked tricks  
surfaced into his I.

Malice remained, in this man, moribund  
unto this hour and even at this hour  
it's sleepy & can't bother .  
Let demons do. But evils other conned  
Henry sufficiently to blot or sour  
your forms & the form of Father.

I was *the* altar-boy he depended on  
on freezing twilit mornings, after good dreams.  
Since when my dreams have changed.  
Could Father wrong occurred to Henry gone  
fearful, grown. Out of the world of seems  
our death has us estranged.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Peter Stitt, 'The Art of Poetry: An Interview with John Berryman', in *Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman*, ed. Harry Thomas (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), pp.18-44 (41-42) (first publ. in *Paris Review* 53 (1972), pp.177-207).

<sup>3</sup> 'Long (my dear) ago, when rosaries', in *Henry's Fate & Other Poems, 1967-1972*, ed. by John Haffenden (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), p.14; see also the 'Sixth Address to the Lord' from *Love & Fame* in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Charles Thornbury (London: Faber and Faber, 1989),

The witty disordering of register, in which infantilisms and high poetic language become effortlessly interchangeable, is a common device for evoking pathos in the Dream Songs; here it expresses that wistful adult longing for a security and surety not enjoyed since childhood. In this way, the poetic voice focalises itself into ‘*the altar-boy*’ of long ago, as Henry prays to the Virgin, whose reassuring form within his world-view he can no longer perceive.

It is a comically plaintive Song, in which he pleads his sincere motives for abandoning the faith, before reminding the Virgin of his years of dependable, and self-sacrificial, service beforehand. It is not straightforward ‘malice’ from within that led him to reject the faith, but ‘evils other’: the wrongs done to Henry by the world, which corrupted his vision and inspired indifference towards it. Such evils may be multitudinous, many ultimately self-inflicted; but ‘the main wrong occurred to Henry’ is undoubtedly the darkly formative event most commonly alluded to in *The Dream Songs* and his late verse. In this Song in particular, his own father, and God the Father, appear to become implicitly interrelated, especially through the degenerative babified syntax of the fourth line in the final stanza, which suggests ‘father-wrong occurred to Henry’. Whether blame results from this or not, it is enough to ‘blot’ and ‘sour’ his image of his heavenly, as well as his earthly, Father.

In the interview with Stitt he describes his apostasy as a gradual process, but in his poetry it is often represented as a more dramatic and immediate response to his father’s suicide. For instance, in the ‘Sixth Address to the Lord’, from *Love & Fame*, he remarks

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p.219. His altar boy days with Father Boniface are also recalled much earlier in the short story ‘The Imaginary Jew’, reprinted in *Recovery* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), pp.243-52 (p.251) (first publ. in *The Kenyon Review* 7 (1945), 529-39).

how ‘my father’s blow-it-all when I was twelve / blew out my most bright candle faith’.<sup>4</sup> In other places, the impact of the tragedy becomes more nuanced; recounting the event in his thinly disguised autobiographical novel *Recovery*, he remarks: ‘I didn’t blame God for that, I just lost all personal sense of him. [...] I couldn’t see Him interested in the individual life in the ordinary way.’<sup>5</sup> This perception of God as detached and impersonal—but who would become for him the object of intense intellectual speculation—is one that the poet would maintain throughout his life, until what he identifies as his ‘religious conversion’ in 1970, which reacquaints him with the ‘God of Rescue’.<sup>6</sup>

At least part of the reason why his father’s suicide caused this sense of dislocation is that he was physically removed from the practice of the Catholic faith, following his mother’s rapid remarriage ten weeks later. The adolescent Berryman and his brother were both entered into the Episcopalian Church: the Church of his new stepfather, John Angus McAlpin Berryman, which their mother had also previously been a member of.<sup>7</sup> With a new parent, and a new faith, he was moved to a new city, New York, and placed in a new school. Consequently, although he ‘still felt very keen’ towards the practice of Christianity, his new circumstances were a radical upheaval and his entire world view, and the place of his faith within it, would never quite return to the same sense of equilibrium that he had once enjoyed. Furthermore, the Catholic Church was the church he always most closely identified with, and on returning to it in 1970, he felt he had affirmed it again as being *the Faith*. Therefore he would identify twelve as the age when

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<sup>4</sup> Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p.219.

<sup>5</sup> Berryman, *Recovery*, p.49.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, pp.39-40.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Mariani, *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman*, 2nd edn (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), p.15.

he lost his belief, since this was the time he felt both bodily and emotionally removed from the practice of Catholicism.

Despite identifying himself as a non-believer as a young adult, the poet appeared to retain a powerful religious sensibility which emerges intermittently in his early poetry of the 1930s and 1940s. In a later poem 'The Search', from *Love & Fame*, he describes how he experienced a sudden and disturbing spiritual awakening during this early period; it prompted his 'search' for the meaning of life, a quest that was from the outset focused on Christianity. In *Berryman's Sonnets* this spiritual unease surfaces with urgent intensity, as he depicts the moral dilemma, and turbulence of conscience, aroused by his adulterous love affair; and *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* constitutes a further, more developed example of the poet's agitated ambivalence towards the demands of the faith.

The poet becomes increasingly preoccupied with critically examining the religious impulse that is impinging on him. This concern finds a professional outlet in the mid-1950s when he is appointed as a lecturer on the Humanities program at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, where he begins teaching courses on the history of western civilisation. He earnestly takes up New Testament scholarship, and is sufficiently inspired by the work of his favourite scholars to attempt his own critical account of the 'Life of Christ' in the late 1950s. The ill-conceived project is soon abandoned, but an alternative vent for his theological and historical contentions with Christianity is found in the new long poem he had started, *The Dream Songs*.

The motivation behind this scholarly quest is a need to offer, especially to himself, a convincing intellectual justification for any leap of faith, a need considered more urgent

in an academic environment which regards Christianity as anti-intellectual. His verse frequently portrays the tensions of this perceived conflict between faith and reason. However, the resolution to this conflict in his late poetry can be seen as both reassuring and problematic, since it is not his intellectual quest, but his despair in the detox ward, that is shown ultimately to bring about his encounter with the 'God of Rescue'. For the poet, however, this constitutes an irrefutable act of divine intervention, a rescue action which enables an epiphany of truth unobtainable through human efforts, and his final verse is dominated by effusive paeans to his new relationship with God.

There are relatively few instances in late twentieth century American and English literature of an author renouncing secularism and wholeheartedly embracing Catholicism, or any other form of Christianity. Berryman is consequently an anomaly amongst his generation of artists and academics; in the case of his fellow poet and close friend Robert Lowell, for instance, the reverse process took place. As a result, the religious concerns of Berryman's poetry cannot be viewed as part of a trend or movement; it is an entirely personal process which unfolded in his life, and influences which may have contributed to it mostly emanate from outside the poet's immediate literary context. He was a poet who consistently allowed the immediate concerns of his private and intellectual life to feed his verse, and, moreover, he explicitly exhibited this process in his poetry. As such, his verse represents a perceptive chronicle of the development of his thinking, as well as an engaging post-modern depiction of the dynamics of both faith and doubt in an individual's struggle for existential truth.

Despite the prevalence of the faith question throughout Berryman's career, there has until now been no comprehensive, full-length study of it. However, there have been a small number of articles focussing on the religious aspects of his work, certain of which have been reprinted in the three essay collections on Berryman. Most of these, not surprisingly, are mainly concerned with his late devotional poetry, and include Paul Mariani's essay on 'Eleven Addresses', which examines some of the intersections between poetry and prayer; and Michael Heffernan's 'John Berryman: The Poetics of Martyrdom', which offers a rather contrived theorisation of the poet's suicide as a religio-poetic act.<sup>8</sup> These devotional poems have also been the subject of a doctoral thesis by Paul Brandt, which sets out to examine Berryman's religious stance; however, his explanation of the poet's transition into an overtly religious poet takes insufficient account of biographical factors, particularly Berryman's own view of his conversion experience.<sup>9</sup>

The most important contribution in this area is John Haffenden's book *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (1980), which, through his substantial use of archival sources, describes the creative evolution of *Love & Fame*, demonstrating how the 'Eleven Addresses' were not part of a pre-ordained structure, but, rather, a direct response to the poet's conversion experience.<sup>10</sup> He also provides extensive annotations to *Delusions*, etc, explaining the sources behind the majority of the biblical, artistic and scientific references contained in the volume. For this reason, I have not needed to devote as much space to these final poems as might be expected in a thesis on this subject.

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Mariani, "'Lost Souls in Ill-Attended Wards": Berryman's "Eleven Addresses to the Lord", in *Berryman's Understanding*, pp.219-31 (first publ. in *A Book of Rereadings*, ed. by Greg Kuzma (Best Cellar Press, 1979), pp.8-21); Michael Heffernan, 'John Berryman: The Poetics of Martyrdom', in *Berryman's Understanding*, pp.232-48.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Brandt, 'Religious Aims in the Late Poetry of John Berryman: *Love & Fame* and *Delusions*, etc' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Kent State University, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> John Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (London: Macmillan, 1980)

However, one densely referential poem which has not yet been subject to detailed commentary is ‘The Search’ from *Love & Fame*, and so, because of the extent to which it informs our understanding of the poet’s religious attitudes, I have devoted considerable attention to it in my final chapter.

However, as this thesis aims to demonstrate, a study of Berryman’s religious poetics should not be confined to his later devotional poetry, but, rather, his last two collections should be viewed as the culmination of a faith narrative that is a constant factor throughout his life’s works. Certain critics, especially J.M. Linebarger, have remarked upon this thematic continuity, but an in-depth examination of the issue is long overdue.<sup>11</sup> Very little critical attention in general has been given to Berryman’s output prior to *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, and so the issue of religious expression in this early work, as well as its relationship to his stylistic development, was something very much open to investigation; unpublished material from the 1930s and 1940s has proved revelatory in this respect. The importance of the faith question in *Homage* has tended to be downplayed in critical readings, and so my chapter on the poem aims to redress this.

There has been some examination of the religious themes in *The Dream Songs*; for instance, Christopher Ricks has made the case for the poem representing a theodicy—a notion later disputed by Douglas Dunn—and Gary Arpin has highlighted the work’s important associations with the Book of Lamentations.<sup>12</sup> However, nothing has so far been written about the role which New Testament scholarship plays in Henry’s search for the meaning of life, aside from the brief glossing of certain names and allusions in

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<sup>11</sup> e.g. J. M. Linebarger, *John Berryman* (New York: Twayne, 1974), pp.38, 55, 68-76,

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Ricks, ‘Recent American Poetry’, *Massachusetts Review* 11 (1970), 313-38 (pp.313-15, 333-38); Douglas Dunn, ‘Gaiety & Lamentation: The Defeat of John Berryman’, in *Berryman’s Understanding*, pp.139-51 (first publ. in *Encounter*, 43 (1974), 72-77); Gary Q. Arpin, “‘I am their Musick’: Lamentations and *the Dream Songs*”, *John Berryman Studies*, 1.1 (1975), 2-8.

the annotations of Haffenden and Sean Ryder.<sup>13</sup> My chapter on *The Dream Songs* illustrates the crucial part played by the quest for the historical Jesus in the poet's religious attitudes during this period, and how many of the Songs aim to depict particular critical problems and debates. Only an in depth knowledge of the poet's sources is able to elucidate these key issues, and a focussed thematic study of this nature affords such an opportunity.

Up to this date there have been around eighteen doctoral theses written which focus exclusively on Berryman, nearly half of which concentrate on *The Dream Songs*. The focus tends to be either on various biographical relations with his verse, such as his alcoholism; or on what appears to be a small array of stylistic issues, such as Berryman's use of persona, epic, and his cultural and artistic influences. His work has so far not tended to lend itself to treatment by any of the more popular schools of modern critical theory. Joseph Mancini's psychoanalytic study of Berryman's work—published as *The Berryman Gestalt: Therapeutic Strategies in the Poetry of John Berryman* (1987)—is an example of one of the few overtly theoretical treatments, although it is an approach that is not altogether out of sympathy with the poet's own intellectual concerns.<sup>14</sup>

About half of these doctoral theses have found their way into publication in some form. However, published studies have tended, not surprisingly, to be more generalised in their scope. Early guides—such as J. M. Linebarger's *John Berryman* (1974) and Joel Connaroe's more tentative work, *John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry* (1977)—are characteristic of the first generation of Berryman scholars speculatively

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<sup>13</sup> Haffenden, *Critical Commentary*, pp.79-122; Sean Ryder, 'Annotations to John Berryman's Dream Songs' (unpublished doctoral thesis, National University of Ireland, Cork, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Mancini, Jr., *The Berryman Gestalt: Therapeutic Strategies in the Poetry of John Berryman* (New York: Garland, 1987)

finding their way into the verse.<sup>15</sup> The proliferation of scholarly interest in the poet was facilitated by the short run of a dedicated journal, *John Berryman Studies*, in the mid to late 1970s, which demonstrated the many different facets which there could potentially be to the subject, including: memoir, poetics, short thematic studies, bibliography, critical commentary and annotations.

Above all, Berryman's major work is characterised by an allusive recourse to autobiography and a wide range of intellectual concepts, and literary and cultural references. For this reason, Haffenden's two major studies of the poet—*Critical Commentary* and his accompanying biography, *The Life of John Berryman* (1982)—have sought to aid interpretation of the poems through an investigation of the 'events and other stimuli of his experience'.<sup>16</sup> He notes how the 'essential character' of Berryman's work derives from his 'habit of studying and treating selectively his life, attitudes, reading, and contacts, not *a posteriori* as an accomplished whole but as a developing and changing pattern of immense complexity.'<sup>17</sup> This study takes a similar approach, but charts the evolving narrative of a particular theme of the poet's life and work, through offering extended commentaries on representative poems or extracts from each consecutive period. I have interpreted the poetry in the light of the ideas and experiences which inspired it, and these have been determined through close study of a variety of archival and published sources.

This thesis would appear to be symptomatic of the way in which Berryman studies, as a field, is evolving, with scholars increasingly focussing on more specialist areas, now that substantial general groundwork has been laid; and Berryman's reputation as a poet

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<sup>15</sup> Joel Conarroe, *John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977)

<sup>16</sup> Haffenden, *Critical Commentary*, p.2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p.8.

deserving such attention is steadily growing in the process. There are other facets of his life and work which have received, and will require, similar treatment, and this work should therefore be viewed in conjunction with similar researches in other areas.

However, no individual study can ever be exhaustive, and the author sincerely hopes this work will serve to inform, and stimulate, further research on the subject of Berryman's religious poetics.

## Chapter 1

### **The Dispossessed Christ – Poems 1936-1948**

Berryman's early poetry of the 1930s and 1940s—culminating in the publication of his first major collection, *The Dispossessed*, in 1948—represents a revelatory corpus of work. As this chapter will describe, a number of these early poems reveal the emergence of themes concerning Christian belief that would establish themselves more forcefully in *The Dream Songs*, including the quest for the historical Christ. Stylistically, his first major collection is the least consistent, and features a more disparate mix of poetic voices than one is used to in his later works. As such, the urgency and openness of the private voice—where the poet selects more from the immediacy of his own life into the persona—does not emerge to present so explicitly his dominant preoccupations of the time. As such, as far as the impression that the published poetry conveys, questions of faith do not appear to become one of the dominant concerns of his life until at least *Berryman's Sonnets*.

A large body of unpublished poetry from the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, reveals that the struggle, as well as the desire, to come to terms with the doctrines of the Catholic faith was a preoccupation of some urgency, which he experienced at regular periods throughout his adult life. At times he adopts devotional forms that would not be employed again until after his major conversion experience, several decades later. These poems show that it was partly the general struggle to develop his own distinct poetic voice—a persona that could persuasively, and entertainingly, bear witness to the immediacy of his own emotional experience—that prevented the successful expression of these, as well as other, personal concerns. Consequently, the poems, as well as other

writings, which did not reach publication during *The Dispossessed* period, reveal a side to the poet that challenges the established religious narrative of his life.

### **Faith and Doubt in the Published Poetry**

The focus of what critical attention there is concerning Berryman's body of work up to, and including, *The Dispossessed*, tends to be on the way it constitutes a stylistic counterpoint to his subsequent verse; consequently, it highlights the innovations which subsequently occurred, or which are sometimes evident in an embryonic form in the early poetry. The poet once described verse written in the 'Auden climate' as being 'ominous, flat, and social; elliptical and indistinctly allusive, casual in tone and form, frightening in import', and he did not exclude his own verse of the period from this categorisation.<sup>1</sup> However, in a later essay, he also draws attention to the emergence of certain rhetorical developments in *The Dispossessed* that begin to free the private voice from the straitjacket of 'period style'. The most significant of these is the 'ambiguous pronoun', employed in 'The Ball Poem', which enabled him for the first time to confront the reader with 'a process which is at once a process of life and a process of art', since the 'poet himself is both left out and put in'.<sup>2</sup>

Other developments, such as a more inventive treatment of syntax and metre, may also be remarked upon, but it is this 'reserving' of a 'commitment of identity' through the ambiguous pronoun which, paradoxically, is the most significant to the poetic

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<sup>1</sup> John Berryman, 'Poetry Chronicle, 1948: Waiting for the End, Boys', in *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), p.297 (first publ. 'in somewhat different form' in *Partisan Review*, 15 (1948), 254-67).

<sup>2</sup> John Berryman, 'One Answer to a Question: Changes', in *Freedom of the Poet*, pp.326-27 (first publ. *Shenandoah*, 17 (1965) 67-76).

exposition of the private voice.<sup>3</sup> The early poetry is often masked by an obscurity and denseness of language that chokes the immediacy of personal experience; but there is an increasing degree of transparency in his representation of private issues as his ability to avoid naked declarations of the 'I' evolves. Eventually, his poetic persona developed to the point where he had the confidence explicitly to identify with it, and once more fully assume the first person in its entirety in *Love & Fame* and *Delusions, etc.* However, certain unpublished poems of the 1930s and 1940s reveal that he had in fact travelled full circle in this respect, and, in both cases, it is the urgent expression of the poet's religious sentiment that appears to necessitate, or at least concur with, this stylistic change.

Critics have noted the surfacing of particular themes in *The Dispossessed* that would predominate in his mature poetry. These are comprehensively cited by J. M. Linebarger, for instance, who, amongst other issues, notes the importance of 'the conflict between faith and doubt.'<sup>4</sup> In fact, throughout the early material this preoccupation is as noteworthy as it is in *The Dream Songs*, but in the published verse it is often greatly obfuscated by the strikingly pregnant, but impersonal and abstracting, imagery. 'Night and the City', which appeared in *Five Young American Poets* (1940) but was left out of *The Dispossessed*, is a case in point. The poem constitutes a meditation on the meaning of death, or the struggle to discern it, through the scenario of two anonymous men, in an anonymous city, discussing the topic. However, it is the inexpressible underlying anxiety, left unspoken, that entirely consumes the poem:

The older man's face  
Hollowed the hope out in the young man's mind,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Linebarger, *John Berryman*, p.38.

Ribbed it with constant agony and pause  
 Where conversation multiplied. The air,  
 Ironic, took their talk of time and cause  
 Up to indifferent walls and left it there.<sup>5</sup>

The ‘conversation’ itself is never represented, only their stark simultaneous declaration: ‘Supreme predicament / Justifies our despair, but the dogs bark.’ The speaker is as ‘indifferent’ to their actual speech as the walls around them, only supplying the reader with a vague impression of it, and instead concentrating on the more ineffable nature of their perplexity in the face of death. In this way the poem does, to a certain degree, evoke the unease concerning both the certainty and uncertainty surrounding death. Unfortunately, the indistinct anonymity of the two men, as well as the speaker, results in the absence of a poetic consciousness in which to orientate this anxiety, and such impersonal abstraction does not necessarily lend itself to a representation of human awareness.

The imagery, however, is often striking and evocative; that of the book-worms and the dogs, for instance, conveys the impersonal process of nature as each man falls into his own ‘skeletal hush’. Consequently, life becomes the process of death itself, and humanity is but a passing participant. In contrast, the two men also consider the possibility of life after death, and the fate of certain souls known to them; their naming compares with their own innominate character in the poem, as if identity only becomes realised once one has graduated from the ‘world-city’ of ‘time and cause’, whose end is death. The fearful contemplation of both eventualities—inexistence and an uncertain after-life—prompts their surrender to man’s primordial instinct for the divine:

The barriers were down, they fell afraid

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<sup>5</sup> Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p.273.

On knees could not remember any smile  
 For godhead, their teeth appeared and they prayed  
 Desperate to eventual stars while

Technicians in high windows parried the dark.<sup>6</sup>

They turn to heavenly illumination for the first time, but the object of their prayers is indistinct and uncertain: the ‘eventual stars’ being a distant source of enlightenment, a phenomenon as potentially ephemeral as the existence of which they are a feature. The suggested contrast is the approach of a technological paganism, which replaces recourse to the divine with the exclusivity of human endeavour. The tension between the two becomes the ‘supreme predicament’ justifying their despair, as they oscillate under the artificial light of human interpretation. The natural dawn only excites the intensity of their desire for transcendent certainty:

A sun on arid plains lifted that bleak  
 Black bridge of nose, historical blood cries

Faster in the spinning veins, faster for some  
 Inscrutable haven from the willed light,  
 The lips for a dignity to be dumb,  
 The antique heart finally for the night.<sup>7</sup>

These final two stanzas crescendo to a climax that negates itself, as the turmoil for enlightenment gives rise to another desire. An even more intense urge is experienced in the ‘spinning veins’ for the ultimate resignation, to embrace a saving oblivion away from the search for truth, as well as the truth itself; a ‘haven’ which appears ‘inscrutable’ in life, but may be found in death: the surrendering of ‘the antique heart finally for the night’. The nature of the ‘historical blood’ that fuels the impulse for one’s death is another of the poem’s rich ambiguities; it can be interpreted, for instance, as an ‘historical’ drive in the sense of a more extended lineage, or the collective, cumulative

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.274.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

impetus of wider civilisation. However, it also has more localised connotations, in which the death impulse becomes self-destructive. The ‘historical blood’ in question would appear to be a heavily veiled, but unmistakable, expression of the obsession that would be far more explicitly dramatised in *The Dream Songs*: that is, the dark shadow cast by the suicide of the poet’s father, and Berryman’s own subsequent suicidal compulsion which haunts him at moments of crisis. It is an example of the way in which the most central and profound concerns of his later poetry are already evident in his earlier material, but in a much more obscure manner. The speaker is the ethereal observer, rather than the experient, and attempts to make a universal statement with dense and heavily codified language. Furthermore, the restraint of the poetic voice is rigidified by the highly pellucid form, the cross-rhymed quatrains and iambic pentameter perfectly regulated to convey a sense of control that is at odds with the subject matter. The despair consequently appears stolid rather than urgent.

This early impersonality of the poetic voice is more appropriately employed in another poem which did make it into *The Dispossessed*. ‘The Disciple’ also concerns faith and doubt, but it features a more developed use of character, and broaches the more ‘public’ subject of the quest for the historical Christ. He submitted the poem unsuccessfully to the *Southern Review* in 1939, before it finally appeared in *Five Young American Poets*.<sup>8</sup> It represents his first approach in verse of the subject that would become one of the most important personal and professional preoccupations of his life:

Summoned from offices and homes, we came.  
By candle-light we heard him sing;

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<sup>8</sup> Charlotte H. Beck, “‘Solely *The Southern Review*’: A Significant Moment in the Poetic Apprenticeship of John Berryman”, in *Recovering Berryman: Essays on a Poet*, ed. by Richard J. Kelly and Alan K. Lathrop (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), pp. 113-24 (p. 120).

We saw him with a delicate length of string  
 Hide coins and bring a paper through a flame;  
 I was amazed by what that man could do.  
 And later on, in broad daylight,  
 He made someone sit suddenly upright  
 Who had lain long dead and whose face was blue.

But most he would astonish us with talk.  
 The warm sad cadence of his voice,  
 His compassion, and our terror of his choice,  
 Brought each of us both glad and mad to walk  
 Beside him in the hills after sundown.  
 He spoke of birds, of children, long  
 And rubbing tribulation without song  
 For the indigent and crippled of this town.

Ventriloquist and strolling mage, from us,  
 Respectable citizens, he took  
 The hearts and swashed them in an upland brook,  
 Calling them his, all men's, anonymous.  
 . . He gained a certain notoriety;  
 The magical outcome of such love  
 The State saw it could not at all approve  
 And sought to learn where when that man would be.

The people he had entertained stood by,  
 I was among them, but one whom  
 He harboured kissed him for the coppers' doom,  
 Repenting later most most bitterly.  
 They ran him down and drove him up the hill.  
 He who had lifted but hearts stood  
 With thieves, performing still what tricks he could  
 For men to come, rapt in compassion still.

Great nonsense has been spoken of that time.  
 But I can tell you I saw then  
 A terrible darkness on the face of men,  
 His last astonishment; and now that I'm  
 Old I behold it as a young man yet.  
 None of us now knows what it means,  
 But to this day our loves and disciplines  
 Worry themselves there. We do not forget.<sup>9</sup>

The Yeatsian eight-line stanza is one of his most favoured forms of the period, and allows him the latitude in this case to carry the conversational discourse of his character.

The poem depicts a first-person eyewitness account of Christ's ministry, from the point

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<sup>9</sup> Berryman, *Collected Poems*, pp.5-6.

of view of an old man who in his youth was one of his chosen ‘disciples’. Along with the recounting of trivial wonderworks, certain major events of the ministry are recounted—Christ’s raising of Lazarus, his teaching, his prophesy of the end times, baptisms; his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion— and the bewildered speaker struggles to make sense of their mysterious nature. In this respect, the poem appears to be heavily indebted to T. S. Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi’, which also features a first person narrative from a contemporary of Christ, in this case one of the Magi.<sup>10</sup> In both cases the Gospel events are focalised through the character, and so the interpretation of them is coloured by the limitations of their knowledge and reason. The effect is an authentic and evocative combination of eyewitness statement and intellectual uncertainty; the resulting ambiguity reflects the mystery behind the historical person of Christ, as well as the difficulty of understanding what appears to be beyond human understanding.

In ‘The Disciple’, even though the narrator is recalling events he experienced long ago in his youth, he stresses that there is little distance in the recollection: ‘I behold it as a young man yet.’ But despite the clarity of his remembrance, he is still not in a position to comprehend it; his fascination and awe remain as stimulated as on the first impression. The disciple himself is not identified, but the concept of the retrospection suggests an interesting comparison with the Fourth Gospel. John the Evangelist is traditionally believed to have written his Gospel in old age, after much reflection on the time he spent with Christ, as the ‘beloved disciple’. However, unlike John’s Gospel, which conveys a highly developed systematic theology, the poem’s disciple is clearly devoid of any theological insight. He appears unable to make any distinction between the significance of mere wonderworks—simple acts of trickery and entertainment, such as his ability to ‘hide coins and bring a paper through a flame’—and apparent miracles,

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<sup>10</sup> According to J. M. Linebarger, Ian Hamilton first identified the likeness in ‘John Berryman’, *London Magazine*, IV (1965), 94. Linebarger, *John Berryman*, pp.43. 156.

such as the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Both types of acts are related with the same degree of enthusiasm, and their juxtaposition in the first stanza raises the problem of interpretation from the outset.

Jesus is defined in purely human terms. His exceptional personal qualities are remembered—such as the power of his teaching, his charisma, and his compassion for the lowly and dispossessed—but he is very reductively referred to as a ‘ventriloquist and strolling mage’; and the theory that he was the Son of God, or even a great prophet, is not entertained. The actions of Christ are described in a defamiliarising manner, which divests them of their sacramental character: ‘he took / The hearts [of ‘respectable citizens’] and swashed them in an upland brook, / Calling them his, all men’s, anonymous’. Here, baptism becomes merely a special act of human fraternity.

The disciple can be interpreted in several ways: firstly, as a naive innocent, who only perceives Christ and his acts on a superficial level; or, conversely, as a shrewd witness who reliably reports events without attributing to them superstitious or doctrinal meanings, leaving open to question what he does not understand. As a result, the style of the narration conveys an ambiguous attitude towards a Christian interpretation of the proceedings narrated within it. The speaker does not offer Christian explanations, but neither does he directly attribute the Gospel events to any other supernatural cause. Together with anachronistic-sounding diction, such as ‘offices’ and ‘coppers’, this contributes to a voice of modern-day secularism, as opposed to pre-Christian paganism.

Linebarger interprets this ambiguity as an expression of the poet’s own conflict of faith, so disputing Ian Hamilton’s conviction that it represents the weakness of a poem which

has no 'centre'.<sup>11</sup> Whilst this indeed may be the case, the poem also raises important issues regarding the role of historical criticism and interpretation, and their influence on faith. It is a forerunner of Dream Songs such as 234, 'The Carpenter's Son', which depicts a similar revaluation of Christ's meaning to his contemporaries, and, hence, to the doctrinal development of Christianity: 'this great man' is misinterpreted by the crowd who 'could not take his point', and this results in him being 'smothered / amongst their passion for      mysterious healing had.'<sup>12</sup> The authentic Christ becomes a victim of the Messianic fervour of his contemporaries. In 'The Disciple', however, Christ represents an even greater mystery, not yet redefined by the poet's self-confident assertion of a particular critical position.

Nevertheless, intriguing questions are raised by the narrative, implying an image of Christ which in some respects supports, and in other ways challenges, Christian orthodoxy. Although the narrator describes Christ in limited human terms, as a charismatic teacher and magician, he is still presented as being responsible for events, such as the raising of a man from the dead, which are beyond understanding. However, another significant feature of the narration is what it omits. Importantly, there is no mention of the most central Christian event of all, the Resurrection, or even the mention of any rumour about it. 'His last astonishment' is the unearthly darkness which befell the world at the moment of his death, the disciple's implication being that the evil of men was also made manifest through this. The implicit suggestion is that the Resurrection is a later tradition that developed within the early Church, and it was not

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<sup>11</sup> Linebarger, *John Berryman*, pp.44-45; Ian Hamilton, 'John Berryman', *London Magazine*, 4 (1965), pp.94-95.

<sup>12</sup> John Berryman, *The Dream Songs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p.253. Since all Dream Songs from the collection, *The Dream Songs*, are individually numbered, subsequent citations of them will be identified by their title number only, and not referenced with a page number.

important to many of Christ's early followers within the eyewitness period.<sup>13</sup> It is an early example of Berryman expressing a sceptical critical position in the area of Christian origins, and formulating representations of the historical Jesus, long before he would poeticise aspects of his New Testament scholarship in *The Dream Songs*. Even if he had not begun to read widely on the subject at this stage, it seems that an inquisitive interest was already a powerful force in his life, and that the struggle with faith that he was experiencing, and depicting in his poetry, was being joined by this critical evaluation of scripture.

In many ways, the last stanza of 'The Disciple' represents the attitude towards the life and times of Christ that continually characterises Berryman's outlook in this and his subsequent works. Although he too believes that 'great nonsense has been spoken of that time', there remains a compulsion to uncover the original meanings behind the Gospel accounts. Christ's teaching reaches beyond his own time to the poet and all who 'worry themselves there', and the urgency of conscience aroused by this is often as evident in the early poetry as it is in his later works. It is his unpublished poetry from *The Dispossessed* period, however, in which this fixation is represented more explicitly, revealing the full extent to which it impinged upon his conscience. Furthermore, this expression is usually marked by the 'terrible darkness' which he experiences on contemplating his inability to commit himself to the faith: a sense of sin and guilt-ridden unworthiness are constant preoccupations in this private body of work.

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<sup>13</sup> Such is the view, for instance, of Charles Guignebert, who would become one of Berryman's favourite critics, as well as favourite sources for his representations of the historical Jesus in *The Dream Songs*. See Charles Guignebert, *Jesus*, trans. by S. H. Hooke (New York: University Books, 1956), p.517. *Jesus* was first published in French in 1933, and in English in 1935, so Berryman may have read the work much earlier than his first written mention of the critic around 1948: University of Minnesota Libraries, John Berryman Papers, Unpublished Prose, Box 2, Mod - Z, #94, 'Religion & the Intellectuals', MS. 2pp. (References to material from this archive will indicate whether it is in manuscript or typescript form through the abbreviations MS and TS).

In contrast, because the treatment of these themes is more impersonal and obscure in *The Dispossessed*, it is the socio-political concerns which appear more pressing. Again, in terms of the more ‘public’ subject matter, what changes over time is not so much his degree of interest, but the poetic voice with which such issues are expressed. He would continue to make a great deal of social and political comment in *The Dream Songs* and later volumes. However, rather than speaking as the elevated, solemn and collectively prophetic voice of his generation—as in poems such as ‘Nineteen Thirty-Eight’ and ‘The Dangerous Year’—his view of world events, and the state of humanity, are increasingly expressed by way of his reaction as an individual, through the medium of his own personality.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, what becomes central to this reaction is the way in which the plight of mankind influences his faith in and relationship with God.<sup>15</sup> The greater transparency of the verse which didn’t make it into the public arena shows that the field of his concerns was quite consistent all along, and that the impersonality of the published poetry represented the mask of a poet still finding his voice.

One poem in *The Dispossessed*, however, which does feature a more confident exposition of the private voice is ‘Canto Amor’, a paean to married love that was completed in 1944. In the following extract, he manages to convey the inner tensions of his ambivalent faith through stylistic innovations that mark the beginnings of his distinct idiolect:

If (Unknown Majesty) I not confess  
praise for the wrack the rock the live sailor

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<sup>14</sup> Berryman, *Collected Poems*, pp.274-75, 278-79.

<sup>15</sup> One may cite Henry’s evaluation of troubled humanity, for example, in *Dream Songs* 177, 217 and 353, in which he is also forced to reflect on God’s role in the world, as well as his trust and belief in Him. ‘Interstitial Office’, in *Delusions, etc.*, becomes a more immediate and explicit example of this, in which the conviction of the ‘Minnesota 8’, for attempting to destroy draft records during the Vietnam war, leads him to express his frustration at God for not ensuring justice in the case: Berryman, *Collected Poems*, pp.228; John Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (London: Macmillan, 1980), pp.130-31.

under the blue sea,—yet I may You bless  
 always for hér, in fear & joy for hér<sup>16</sup>

The epithet by which he addresses God encapsulates, through its uncertain reverence, his ambiguous belief. These lines are strongly echoed years later in the ‘First Address to the Lord’, in which he declares that he is capable of knowing the ‘unknowable’ God, ‘only as far as gratitude & awe / confidently & absolutely go’.<sup>17</sup> At this stage, he feels unable to praise God for His own sake, but can bring himself to express gratitude for the joy he has found in his marriage. A further ambiguity is introduced, however, by the word ‘confess’, insinuating that although he may feel praise welling up as a result of certain faith-inspiring events, he would not be willing to admit it, either to God, or to the world. The subject of his praise instead becomes his wife, for whom he offers her Creator qualified thanks.

As well as the playful vauntery of the prayer itself, the energetic virtuosity of his syntax also harnesses something of the conflicts and fears underlying the bravado. With echoes of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’, the battering asyndeton—‘the wrack the rock the live sailor’—evokes the awesome plight of man at the hands of God. Syntactical displacement also infuses the reductive, but musical, confines of the terza rima with a personality that elevates itself beyond the form. Grammatical elisions—such as ‘I not’, instead of ‘I do not’—and inversions—such as ‘I may You bless’—parodically archaize the speaker’s voice into one of bardic mock-affectation. Turning the expression of such explicitly private sentiment into rhetorical showmanship in this way, enabled him to convey it publicly without having to don the impersonal mask of obliquity. As an exploration of his concealed verse of the period

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<sup>16</sup> Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p.47.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p.215.

will demonstrate, 'Canto Amor' represents the tip of an experimental iceberg in which he had long been rehearsing the poetic dramatisation of his own life. Furthermore, certain crisis points were coming to a head in the early 1940s, which made the need for such a mode of expression all the more paramount.

## **The Unpublished Poetry**

### **The College Years**

A number of things are striking about Berryman's sequestered output of the 1930s and 1940s, but, principally, the 'confessional' element is more openly manifest. Whereas this may be expected from work retained in the private sphere, this confessionalism is also accompanied by an obvious striving to develop a rhetorical voice with which to express it with more assurance. Stylistic factors are to be seen emerging which, although they appear at times in *The Dispossessed*, begin to exhibit their future potential when used in conjunction with the less opaque communication of personal matter. This also appears to coincide with a far greater urgency in the speaker's religious expression; and the prayer format, which many of the poems adopt, seems to be an important dimension to this rhetorical development. The impersonal, omnipresent voice cannot address the personal God in prayer; it must be personalised. Consequently, the work that did make it into print conveys a far more secular outlook in comparison, giving the deceptive impression that the importance of the faith question in his verse does not arise until much later.

Berryman's uncollected verse of the time also seems comparatively more religious in nature than other poetry of the 'Auden climate', whose commitment to socialism was generally more concerned with liberating mankind from the injustices of its political and economic systems. In contrast, the thrust of his work appears in the main more insular, being more concerned with resolving issues within the self, such as his crises of belief and ambition. Nevertheless, the troubles of humanity at large do not escape his artistic attention, and the conflict in Europe constitutes the inescapable backdrop to all his early material. It is in the unpublished poetry in particular that these concerns are expressed in more theological terms; this brings God's role into the equation and consequently becomes a consideration to his faith in Him. This approach is demonstrated by 'Spanish Prayer', for instance, which was written in August 1936, shortly before he left New York for Cambridge—where he would experience a greater proximity to the continent's unfolding events:

Which of thy armies, regimented Lord,  
Will gain, we know not; we ask no deliverance  
From this the meet destruction in our time.  
Atrocities we see on either side,

Care less appalled by them than by the sum  
of general death, the idols, buildings gone  
Down, the lands waste: we ask only that in the end  
Remain to us a land that we can use.<sup>18</sup>

Certain of the least inspiring characteristics of the Auden climate prevail, such as the sententious, bromidal tone, and the bland impersonality of the collective voice.

However, what redeems the poem is the infiltration of ambiguity. The speaker's epithetical address to God in the poem's first line is reminiscent of those that Henry makes in *The Dream Songs*; in this case it implicates God in the military mentality of

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<sup>18</sup> U Minn, JBP, Unpublished Miscellaneous Poetry, Box 2, Folder 32, #67, MS.

His creation. The speaker's question suggests not only that God, with His foresight, has the power to prevent the destruction, but even that the conflict may be a war game He is playing with humanity, with the outcome known only, and even predetermined, by Him. At the same time, man's culpability is stressed in that this is his 'meet', or fitting, destruction, and any request for deliverance would be unreasonable and undeserved. The ambivalence created here makes the case a classic exposition of the problem of evil.

Several further ambiguities result from interesting syntactical arrangements, not demanded by any rhyme scheme. The second stanza opens with an equivocal play on 'care less'/careless. Are we careless to be more appalled by specific atrocities, rather than by the sheer numbers of people who are perishing in the Spanish Civil War? Or do we 'care less' for these atrocities than for the general sum of victims? This either/or is naturally a pointless confrontation to present the reader with, since both are appalling in their own right; but that, however, is the point: there is so much to be appalled by that one does not know where to start. However, a further significant choice of syntax saves the poem from sliding irretrievably into a simple stolid doom-ladenism. The truncated 'remain to us'—as opposed to the more conjunctive and objectifying: 'that there remains to us'—has a twofold connotation. It constitutes, on the one hand, a plea to God not to remove the stewardship of the land which man has abused; but at the same time it also expresses a sense of association with, and possessiveness of, the land itself: the kind of territorial possessiveness which is usually a contributory factor in war.

‘Spanish Prayer’ was written three years into a poetic career which began with the writing of a series of sonnets to his mother.<sup>19</sup> Although at this point he is still far from the expression of a distinctive voice, there is enough controlled ambivalence in the poem to demonstrate his desire to communicate the inner tensions of belief and uncertainty through striking manipulations of language. The necessity of this recourse seemed to heighten in its urgency as the decade drew to a close. His time at Cambridge was far from being a period of indifference towards matters of faith, as suggested by his account in *Love & Fame*. Instead, the notion of the anxious apostate, who is victimised by his inability to believe or commit himself to the faith, is developed into an integral part of the tortured poetic persona.

A poem entitled ‘Vigil in the Lakes’, written on 13 April 1938 during a visit to the Lake District, represents the debate which was occurring within him:

I lay and could not rest, watching the Angel,  
 Its full wings folded over him asleep  
 As day by day it spreads those wings to keep  
 His Christian soul against the trials of hell.

Slight moving sounds of water the night bred,  
 I heard the cold wind upon Windermere,  
 Wind on the meadow, and I seemed to hear  
 Small in the wind the voices of the dead

In argument, some urging their continued  
 Life, some their simple status as blown dust,  
 The principle forgotten, the mould lost  
 That kept them men; others their solitude

Wept or would curse; but not one said enough  
 Of the immediate thought that vexed my brain.  
 I looked and saw above my friend again  
 The Angel. At my head, nothing of love.

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<sup>19</sup> John Plotz et al., ‘An Interview with John Berryman’, *Berryman’s Understanding*, p.4 (first publ. in *Harvard Advocate*, 103 (1969), 4-9).

The voices dwindled or went by my ear.  
 Faithless in the dark, lonely, I could take  
 The formidable presence of the lake  
 For deity, and so master my fear—

But no no satisfaction in the night  
 For my entreaty. Even the Angel fled  
 Or hung invisible, while on the bed  
 I lay among my terror left and right.<sup>20</sup>

His use of the envelope stanza recalls Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 'In Memoriam A.H.H.', which underlines the poem's theme of spiritual doubt. However, Berryman's modified pentameter version slows down the movement. This aids his depiction of a long disturbing night in which isolation and the fear of death keep him awake, forcing him to contemplate the faith that appears to help his Christian friend to sleep easy.<sup>21</sup> The poet, who once 'believed in God and my Guardian Angel to the hilt', sorrowfully envisages the same sense of assurance and protection now belonging to his companion.<sup>22</sup> However, the speaker is too distracted by his religious misgivings, represented by the debate of the dead, to attract a similar angelic presence to himself.

It is the voice of nature he feels most attentive to, and he hears death promise through this either inexistence—the corporeal soul perishing forever with the body—or 'continued life', whether in the form of a denial of the end, or living on through the process of nature. However, he is not inclined to hear the dead affirm that they have met what Tennyson called the 'immortal Love', which is here represented by the angel. Consequently, his doubts will not allow him also to envisage the angel above his own head. He assuages this existential dread by contemplating the natural world, to the point where it subrogates his need for a relationship with a higher being, and it becomes his

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<sup>20</sup> U Minn, JBP, Unpub. Misc. Poetry, Box 2, F29, #18, TS, 'Vigil in the Lakes'. A handwritten draft with some minor differences, is found in Box 2, F32, #56, MS. The date is derived from the latter.

<sup>21</sup> The friend is presumably John Bateman, who, according to Mariani, was his companion on the walking tour of the Lake District. Mariani, *Dream Song*, p.84.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Haffenden, *Life of Berryman*, p.18.

‘deity’. Eventually, his despair is such that even the sight of the angel, the possibility of faith itself, disappears from view and he is abandoned to his ‘terror’. The same image of rejected faith and protection reoccurs in a sonnet, entitled ‘Easter’; only this time the guardian angel is his:

Lord, Thou has proved me, & known me. Let me die:  
 What horrible knowledge now is wonderful  
 I do not ask again. I search the sky  
 The raining Easter – Ah my heart is full  
 And dull, and I do not haste as I would  
 Hearing the order of the rain descend,  
 Hearing the wings unfold which in childhood  
 Each night called back, who over me would tend  
 And bless my grace of sleep, ‘Forgive me, Lord:  
 That in dark silence turning, wretch of sleep,  
 I do not turn to Thy Invisible board  
 For good, for rest; that I my vigils keep  
 Alone; that bruised and torn and in despair  
 I would & would not pass into Thy awful care.<sup>23</sup>

As will become apparent, Berryman was often in the habit throughout his life of directing the subject matter of his verse to what the occasion demanded, and he would often poetically meditate in verse on the meaning of the major Christian feasts when he came to them. Consequently, a number of these unpublished poems were written on, or around, Christmas and Easter. In this case, here on Easter day, the sorrowful speaker is overwhelmed by the feast’s significance, and the ‘horrible knowledge’ which has been vouchsafed to him and ‘now is wonderful’. Unfortunately, this only exacerbates the dilemma of his indecision—where he ‘would & would not pass into Thy [God’s] awful care’—by making the full extent of what he is rejecting now seem so much the greater. God is the one who has put him through trial, but who also now makes known to him His offer of protection and salvation. Whereas in ‘Vigil in the Lakes’ he struggles with

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<sup>23</sup> U Minn, JBP, Unpub. Misc. Poetry, Box 1, F24, unnumbered MS, ‘Easter’. The poem is undated, but the style and subject matter suggests that it is most likely to have been written in the late 1930s, or early 1940s, when he wrote a number of other holy sonnets.

the meaning of death itself, this prayer of Easter is an expression of belief, but also unworthiness: he is in possession of a will which does not want to repent. In his subsequent poetry, particularly of the early 1940s, he would oscillate between these two kinds of despair, as his belief itself oscillated, and he would increasingly adopt the mode of prayer to address the God that he both believed, and did not believe, was there.

### **The Return to America: Bhain Campbell and Other Factors.**

In July 1938, shortly after his return to America, Berryman met Bhain Campbell, who would become one of his closest friends until his premature death two years later. Campbell was a committed Marxist, as well as poet, and for a brief period Berryman's poetry displayed his influence with a more concentrated focus on socio-political issues, particularly the exploitation of the working class: 'River Rouge, 1932' and 'Detroit. Thanksgiving', being two notable examples.<sup>24</sup> Although he flirts with the idea of Marxist revolution in such poems, this never crystallises into any subsequent ideological commitment. It seems that he was as unconvinced about embracing any radical political faith of the time, as he was about taking up the Catholic faith again. As the following short poem, written in August 1938, suggests, any cynicism towards capitalism may have had more to do with a certain frustration over his own unfulfilled ambitions:

I asked if it were possible  
That in the democratic world  
A man might rise and fall,  
Neither brought up nor hurled  
Down, but by his strict endeavour

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<sup>24</sup> Berryman, *Collected Poems*, pp.280-82.

See the lights moving on the wall,  
 Attain to reputation.  
 —I was told yes, but never  
 Yet saw that miracle of God's devotion.<sup>25</sup>

He describes the poem as an 'Ode', and he adapts the Spenserian nine-line stanza—used by Keats and Shelley—by compressing the pentameter template, whilst retaining the concluding alexandrine. The result is epigrammatic; he aims for the expression of a short, witty, but profound statement. He composed a number of such 'epigrams' in the same form, and they were compiled for what was possibly intended to be a dedicated collection of them. The wry cynicism which it exudes is partly explained by the context in which it was written. Having returned home to New York on completion of his degree in Cambridge, Berryman was finding his two most important pursuits of that summer—the search for a teaching job, and getting his poetry published—both depressingly unsuccessful, and he quickly suffered 'a form of nervous breakdown.'<sup>26</sup> The epigram was written during a recuperative stay with Allen Tate and his wife in West Cornwall, Connecticut, following an invitation which, Berryman noted, had appeared in 'the nature of divine grace'.<sup>27</sup>

The epigram lays the blame for the failure of the American dream on God, rather than the economic system: the alexandrine sarcastically suggesting that His duty is to ensure that just consequences of success result from genuine human endeavour. What may appear a relatively insignificant composition does epitomise his attitude during the period, in which unfulfilled ambition would constitute an integral part of his turbulent relationship with God—who he clearly felt owed him a better reward for his efforts. The kind of literary success which the poet craved would be a long time coming, and other

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<sup>25</sup> U Minn, JBP, Misc. Unpub. Poetry, Box 1, F23 (Epigrams) - 'Michigan (Detroit)', TS, 'Ode (Cornwall, Aug 1938)'.  
<sup>26</sup> Haffenden, *Life of Berryman*, p.104.  
<sup>27</sup> Mariani, *Dream Song*, pp.92-93.

troubling events in his life over the next few years—including his breakdown in Detroit, and the death of Campbell—would only add to his sense of persecution at the hands of his Creator, and the questioning as to whether His ‘mighty hand’ really does have dominion over the great scheme of things. However, one important relationship which began in 1941 would mollify his struggle with God, and encourage him to revalue his life anew. Once more he found himself in a position where he desired to embrace the faith; however, a serious inner conflict still existed, and this would lead to a whole new outpouring of religious verse in a style more nakedly confessional than anything he would be willing to place in the public arena for years to come.

### **Marriage and the early 1940s**

On 24 October 1942 Berryman married Eileen Mulligan in the Lady Chapel of Saint Patrick’s Cathedral, New York. Eileen was a practising Catholic, and her allegiance to Christianity appeared to intensify the dilemma over his own position towards the faith. His poetry of the first half of the decade is thematically characterised by the expression of religious indecision, as well as a sense of sin, failure and general unworthiness in all areas of his life. Stylistically, this coincides with a period of great experimentation; he tries out numerous poetic forms in an effort to voice his personality and preoccupations in a way that could be confidently presented to the reading public. His wife’s devotion to her faith encourages him to reflect, and on the first Christmas of his marriage he turns his attention, as accustomed, to the meaning of the feast day. On this occasion he chooses a stanza form that would later become habitual:

Ah, do You look down – I almost think

this morning that you do –  
 When tattered men upon torn knees sink  
 Hopeful and hopeless O that You  
 Pierce the floor of cloud to where  
 The world shudders in war?

Was it Your son, did You send, today,  
 those centuries ago?—  
 Heartbreaking best man – he did not say  
 Anywhere, anywhere, that You  
 Stood beside him at the Cross,  
 Showed him Your perfect face.

Years on years – but what are years to You –  
 The shocked & hungry mind  
 Works on that strange time. We do not know  
 Why thus we beggar, beat & blind  
 Ourselves, our fellows,—nor why we  
 Kneel here to Your pity.<sup>28</sup>

The poem possesses features that prefigure both *The Dream Songs* and the devotional poetry which came after it. The speaker's epithetic and ruminating address to God prefigures poems such as 'A Prayer After All' and 'Ecce Homo', especially as the slow bewildered insight into the person of Christ presents itself to him. He would not return to the mode of prayer in his verse, except in the more irreverent manner of Henry, until the poems of *Love & Fame*. The Dream Song elements are mainly apparent in the way in which he attempts to strike a more sceptical tone, a tone which conveys the ambiguity of his belief which has foregrounded itself through the celebration of this historical feast day. His opening thoughts concern the most fundamental basis of the Christian faith: the existence of God. He declares an emerging half-conviction that the subject of human prayer may not just be a delusion after all: he 'almost' thinks that the petitions of men elicit some response, even though there are major limitations to that response. There is little faith in the 'God of Rescue' at this point. In the light of mankind's half-hearted pleas for intervention, as the world successfully embarks on

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<sup>28</sup> U Minn, JBP, Unpub. Misc. Poetry, Box 1, F16, #5. MS, dated '25 Dec 1942'.

self-destruction—humanity’s faith itself is ambivalent, for it is both ‘hopeful and hopeless’—he can only half-envisage a God who ‘looks down’ on catastrophe, rather than one who actively concerns Himself with the affairs of the world.

In the second stanza, the speaker challenges God about the doctrine of the Incarnation, in a manner that becomes somewhat goading. The wedding conceit he presents him with plays on the traditional Catholic notion of the Church being ‘the Bride of Christ’, an analogy intended to demonstrate the close and everlasting relationship between the two. In this case, God, as Christ’s father, takes the role of the ‘heartbreaking best man’, who did not show up for the wedding. Consequently, the speaker questions the relationships between Christ and God, and between Christ and his Church, which are promulgated by Catholic doctrine. The implication is that the genuine historical Christ claimed neither his Sonship with God, nor any affinity with the notion of a church and sacramental system to be developed in his name.

Berryman would certainly associate himself with ‘the shocked & hungry mind’ of the third stanza, which ‘works on’ the truth behind the origins of Christianity. In the light of such apparent uncertainty, he questions why we still ‘kneel here to [His] pity’.

Furthermore, as his parenthetical aside—‘but what are years to You’—insinuates, God, if He does exist, is either indifferent to, or unaware of, the extent of human suffering, with its stretched patience and anxious insecurity. The conclusion is therefore one of resignation; he can neither understand man’s inhumanity to man, nor why mankind still pleads for the intervention of a God who remains oblivious or unconcerned. The poem anticipates the theology of *The Dream Songs*, with its critical challenges to orthodox Christianity, and the creation of an absurd comic scenario to illustrate the perceived problem that is thrown up by closer scrutiny of the Gospels. One of the New Year

resolutions that Berryman made a few days later was ‘to learn to know Christ’.<sup>29</sup>

Presumably he meant a closer relationship with him in the spiritual sense, but his verse also demonstrates how he desired a greater knowledge of him in the historical sense.

The poem does not exhibit as strongly as later work, such as ‘Canto Amor’, the energised syntax and rhetorical devices that would become the hallmark of his style. However, it does feature some emerging Henryisms, such as the exclamatory ‘Ah’ and balladic ‘O’, which signify his desire to represent, rather than escape from, the expression of personality. It also constitutes an early appearance of the famous three six-line stanza form, strictly rhymed, which would become the mould into which he would daily pour his preoccupations, over the fifteen years of *Dream Song* composition. The poet would later claim that the form had been inspired by his readings of William Butler Yeats, but the general concept also appears to be derived from the ‘Songs’ in Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Book of Pictures*, which depicts the viewpoint of characters from various walks of life, as they experience some kind of momentary realisation. Utterly captivated by this model, he had begun composing his own ‘Nervous Songs’ in the summer of 1942.<sup>30</sup>

At this point in its evolution the form appeared carefully conceived and tightly regulated. In this instance, the rhyme scheme resembles a mini-Shakespearian sonnet with its cross-rhymed quatrain and closing couplet (ababcc). The metre is exceedingly strict with its alternating tetrameter and trimeter; the extended feet are consistently in the same place (4½, 3, 4½, 4, 3, 3½, 3), with only a very minor variation in the last stanza.

As ‘The Nervous Songs’ sequence developed, the form became much more flexible.

The rhyme schemes would vary, or not be employed at all, and the metre would expand

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted by Charles Thornbury in Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p.xxvii.

<sup>30</sup> Plotz, ‘Interview with Berryman’, *Berryman’s Understanding*, p.12; Mariani, *Dream Song*, p.149.

to a pentameter template, but never be as tightly regulated as in this case. It seems he initially tried to rein in the potential flexibility of the form. The most significant thing about the Christmas poem, however, is that it shows him using the Nervous Song form, not for the voice of another, but for one that appears more explicitly identifiable with the poet himself. Consequently, it represents an important forerunner of *The Dream Songs* in more ways than one.

Another variation of the form occurs with ‘Timothy in Ruins’, a ballad written during the same period, and revised on 23 December 1942, two days before writing ‘Ah, do you look down’:

Timothy stood among the wicked ruins  
 Exclaiming on the terror of time past,  
 The long long way he came, what way to go  
 And where can Timothy be safe at last?  
 —Why, most of the men and more of the wives  
 Are dead dead drunk or running for their lives.

Timothy saw the signals red and green  
 But he had lost his maps and could not tell  
 The long long way he came, what way to go  
 And what has Timothy to do in Hell?  
 —Why, most of the ants and more of the bees  
 Are sad sad death or killing at their ease.

Timothy heard the foul wind as it came  
 Whirling to blind and alter in that place  
 The long long way he came, what way to go  
 And how shall Timothy preserve his face?  
 —Why, most of the masks and more of the eyes  
 Are dread dread calm or twisting their surprise.

Timothy knew that all his friends were gone,  
 God gone, and he alone stood there to say  
 The long long way he came, what way to go  
 And whether Timothy can find the way.

—Why, most of the roads and more of the air  
Are red red blood or going to disappear.

Timothy felt the last infernal ice  
Rising before his dazzled eyes to hide  
The long long way he came, what way to go  
And where is Timothy to seek his bride?  
—Why, most of the young and more of the old  
Are mad mad dammed or dancing in the cold.<sup>31</sup>

The poem features certain key characteristics of the Nervous Song style, in its use of the six-line pentameter stanza, and the introduction of a character who experiences a moment of crisis. However, the format has been combined with traditional ballad conventions—refrains, incremental repetition, simple melodic language—which enable this rapid, tragic tale of a lost soul in hell to avoid the dull gravitas present in much of his religious poetry of the period. The nature of such a tragedy in itself is also typically balladic, as is the way the action starts abruptly at the outset of the poem and moves on in a clear narrative progression.

Timothy unwittingly finds himself deeper and deeper inside hell, unable to retrace his steps, or recall exactly what brought him there. Employing what appears to be a very Dantesque conception of hell, he eventually finds himself at the very bottom in the ice-lake of Cocytus, the ‘last infernal ice’ from which he will never be able to free himself. The character of Timothy is representative of a kind of Everyman, but one who is intended to embody the better side of humanity. He is a comparative innocent who has found himself caught up in the general damnation that mankind has inflicted upon itself, ‘hell’ partly being an allegory for the world at war in 1942. Amidst the cruelty and corruption of humanity he is increasingly unable to remain true to his ideals and ‘preserve his face’.

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<sup>31</sup> U Minn, JBP, Unpub. Misc. Poetry, Box 1, F18, unnumbered TS. Box 2, F31, #61 contains another typescript with some slight variations and experimental handwritten revisions (dated ‘23 Dec 1942’).

In a similar vein is the 'The Right Reverend in God', a ballad which is highly Audenesque in style, and which also conveys a distinctly Christian message. It concerns a man who rejects decadent western values, not for the cause of socialist revolution, as in earlier poems, but for the Church:

Here is the story of a man  
 Who took the letter, having lost  
 Also the discarded phantom;  
 In fear forgot the Holy Ghost.

Twentieth century product, he  
 Believed the bells and hurried from  
 The odour of iniquity  
 Lest he be driven to assume

A world where hands are manifest  
 Between the knees, of arid eyes,  
 A world that will be moving west  
 From expectation to surprise,

The context gone that let appear  
 Relation and hypothesis,  
 Familiar statement of next year,  
 The value of a rook in chess.

One morning there in the pulpit  
 Where he had sacred things to tell  
 In a sincere and nasal shout,  
 The sounding-board suddenly fell:

By strange violence freed from strife  
 This man, crumpled and out of breath,  
 Forsook the attitude of life  
 And put on everlasting death.<sup>32</sup>

The poem attempts to portray the tensions between the worldly and the spiritual life, and confront the expectations of both. The Bishop in question is one who has rejected a secular existence for the religious; he is a 'twentieth century product', who, at the end of

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<sup>32</sup> U Minn, JBP, Unpub. Misc. Poetry, Box 2, F27, #19, TS (undated).

the story, reverts to the way of ‘everlasting death’, because he has not completely transformed his twentieth century mindset. Even though he has adopted the outward trappings of Christianity, he has put his faith in his own humanity, rather than recognising his dependency on God. The introductory stanza foregrounds the moral of the story. Having adopted his new role as man of the cloth to ‘the letter’, he also lost sight of his former self, which became ‘the discarded phantom’; he overlooked his own fallibility and sinful, human nature. In consequence, he forgets his reliance on the sustenance and inspiration provided by ‘the Holy Ghost’, so when trial comes his way he easily falls. The language subverts the lexicon of piety to express, with comic levity, the degeneracy of the West: for example, ‘odour of iniquity’, rather than ‘odour of sanctity’; hands ‘between the knees’ (in sexual exploration), rather than together in prayer.

However, once the Right Reverend has rejected the trappings of his former state, and become well assimilated into that of a religious, he can no longer perceive before him the contrast between the ideal, or ‘hypothesis’, which led him to adopt his new life in the first place, and the more decadent existence of the society he has forsaken. In other words, familiarity breeds indifference towards his vocation, and he disregards his constant need for renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he forgets. His metaphorical ‘fall’ through the sounding-board, in the penultimate stanza, is the natural result of him not maintaining this firm foundation as he lives out his vocation. He becomes freed from the ‘strife’ of the more challenging spiritual path, and again opts for the easier, more sensuous course, where he will ‘put on everlasting death’. The poem’s surprising message consequently stresses the necessity of a sustained spiritual, or prayer, life, as an antidote to the existential problems symptomatic of his age.

The work cannot be dated precisely, but its stylistic and thematic similarities with ‘Timothy in Ruins’ suggests it also derives from the early 1940s. If this is the case, then it demonstrates how, like Auden at the same time, Berryman had now left the political idealism of the thirties behind him, and was beginning the decade with verse whose tone is unmistakably Christian in nature. The ballad form appears to have been an experimental vehicle for prophesying this Christian message to his age, its accessible musical and narrative qualities anticipating a more popular appeal. However, although the story is straightforward, the philosophical nature of the moral, at least as it is expressed, is too cumbersome for the form to carry. The clumsily cogitative phrasing is not helped by awkward-sounding pararhymes, contributing to the sluggish tension between weightiness and levity that the chosen style inspires.

‘Man in His House’ represents a further example of the speaker making a judgement upon his generation:

Sometimes he rose and went downstairs at nine,  
 More often lay until full noon in bed  
 Among old prints, four pillows at his head;  
 His afternoons were spent without design  
 In delicate pleasures, stamps or a new novel.  
 He liked to watch his shadow on the gravel,  
 And feathered lust about him in the morning  
 Played. But all the while the house was burning.

Invisibly, though plainly from above,  
 His wood, stone, steel were flaming: lights came on  
 In family timber shortly to be gone  
 Despite the loyalty in it, the love  
 That set it proudly up for sons and daughters.  
 As once there was a destruction by waters  
 So there is fire upon his generation.

Fire, fire like incision or purification.<sup>33</sup>

On this occasion, he reverts to a version of the Yeatsian eight-line stanza, the form he appears most comfortable with during *The Dispossessed* period. This allows him to express the matter at hand with a greater degree of moral gravitas than was achieved in the ballads; the parabolic straightforwardness of the language also contributes to this effect. It is essentially another Christian morality poem. The Gospel message he promotes in this instance is the necessity for being ready for judgement, and working towards salvation with appropriate urgency. It is Berryman's version of the parable of the rich farmer, suggesting also Christ's prophecy of the apocalypse and Second Coming.<sup>34</sup> The anonymous Everyman is not overtly sinful, but although apparently harmless, his leisureliness represents a state of decadent indifference to the purpose of his existence and the signs of the times. He does not realise that mankind is already being judged and purified through the burning destruction of war.

Whereas in these last three examples the poet depicts the world as meriting a great chastisement—the current war being the means by which this is enacted—at other times he appears equally conscious, and afraid, of his own unworthiness in the sight of God. The first-person is used much more extensively in these unpublished poems, in order to express this personal sphere of conscience in a more transparent manner. Like the character of Timothy, the speaker usually depicts himself as being unable to escape the damnation in store him, mainly as a result of a deficiency of willpower. An untitled poem in terza rima provides an appropriate rowing conceit for this predicament:

My sins, is it too late to turn around  
And steal a real boat and lie back, downstream

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<sup>33</sup> U Minn, JBP, Unpub. Misc. Poetry, Box 2, F29, #31, TS (undated).

<sup>34</sup> Lk 12.16-21, 17.26-37.

Descending with a comfortable sound:

Too late for dinner ever, oysters & cream?  
They say we are not hungry—if we are  
Should not be, nibble a cloud or munch a dream.

Other indigestibles. Then the swift water.  
Like the cracked exile I was ‘wrong from the start’;  
Ignorant the spring would be so far,

Where we rest. Looking closely in my heart,  
I should have been bred to a blither trade,  
Something less racking, sweeter than a fart,—

To be a chemist who the great war made,  
A banker be, wearing a bloody hat,  
An operator operating in the shade,—

To meet the Devil at his pretty gate  
And have a stiff drink before going on  
Down. Hey derry down. Alas too late:

My breath too short with the water’s shock, the sun  
Too hot, to turn out of the way of my youth,  
Its ordures, ardours. Stroke and stroke again

To crow a wicked note, the old one, truth.<sup>35</sup>

Overall, the poem constitutes a further example of the poet striving to voice the most profound and serious of subjects with some infusion of the humour and intellectual energy of his personality. For the most part, however, there are serious lapses in the quality of its expression, the poet on this occasion not quite rising to meet the challenge of the form. The potentially reductive demands on the diction made by the Italian rhyme scheme are certainly succumbed to, for example, in his choice of ‘sweeter than a fart’. Nevertheless, although ineptly conveyed, the narrative imparted by the boating conceit does afford a perceptive depiction of one man’s struggle with his concupiscence; it is an image he will employ again, but more successfully, in Sonnet 111.<sup>36</sup> Also, the aquatic

<sup>35</sup> U Minn. JBP, Unpub. Misc. Poetry, Box 2, F 29, #10, TS (undated).

<sup>36</sup> Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p.126.

scenario is effectively brought to life in the terza rima poem by the flowing musical assonance, internal rhyme, and undulating pararhyme.

The poem begins with an interesting subversion of the reader's expectations. Rather than asking whether it is too late to change his ways for the better, the speaker asks whether there is still time for him give up the effort of trying to be virtuous, and submit to the descending drift of his sinful nature. He now wishes to catch up on the sensuous delights, the 'oysters & cream', of life; whereas religion, on the contrary, had taught him to ignore his appetites, or assuage them with more intangible satisfactions which he now finds 'indigestible'. With his will to resist failing, he is soon swept along by the 'swift water', admitting he was wrong ever to think he could reach the salvation on offer at the end. With his incapacity to endure denial, suffering and perseverance of will, he also questions his fitness for the writer's vocation, suggesting that he should have 'been bred to a blither trade'. He contemplates the inevitable fate of his soul, and the insurmountable 'ordures, ardours' of his youth; he then resigns himself to the hopelessness of his efforts, and 'crow[s] a wicked note, the old one, truth'.

Berryman used the terza rima form on several other occasions—'Canto Amor', and adaptations of it in 'The Lightning' and 'The Dispossessed', being the most notable examples—and it is but one of the indications of the extent to which he was then suffused with the influence of Dante. His images of hell are also invariably drawn from the *Inferno*; this was evident in 'Timothy in Ruins', as it is in another poem in the Nervous Song format, entitled 'Holy Saturday':

Christ sleeps today, or He wanders underground  
 Among the vague shades visiting his lost —  
 We howl in quarrel & despair, war's sound

Starts on the steppes, the hottest islands, grows,  
 How many souls fled from it since the sun rose?  
 Husband & wife estranged, their despairs crossed.

The chatter of my scalp decaying, in my arms  
 And shoulders tremors, the cold weight near the thighs –  
 Yes, in the midst of more violent alarms  
 I suffer them still – they are with me, my own,  
 Hunger & failure, the hollow in the bone.  
 So that I hear His voice, & shudder, but cannot rise.

You wandering or resting after pain  
 Unspeakable, called Saviour: was it your pain  
 Greater than this which I take up again  
 Hourly, drop, take up again – what shall I do?  
 This not like your pain has nothing in view.  
 Ten years. Hear my voice. What shall I do?<sup>37</sup>

In general the poem conforms to the usual attributes of a Nervous Song: it has the three six-line stanzas, with their iambic pentameter template, and represents the reflections of a character in a given situation as they reflect on their state of life. The poem could conceivably be given the title ‘The Song of the Damned Soul’. However, what is particularly interesting about this poem is the extent to which Berryman clearly associates himself with the damned soul, but in a way that in addition allows him a get-out clause: the use of character in a situation not literally, but potentially, his own, enables him also to say ‘this is not really me’. As Sharon Bryan remarks: ‘persona poems provide the valuable focus of first person, but declare themselves to be spoken by someone other than the author and so offer an escape—not from personality, but from self-consciousness. The shy actor can forget himself or herself and at the same time express powerful emotions by assuming a role.’<sup>38</sup> Consequently, ‘Holy Saturday’ constitutes one form of experiment with the use of ‘the ambiguous pronoun’, in which, in Berryman’s words, ‘a commitment of identity can be “reserved”’; in this case the

<sup>37</sup> U Minn, JBP, Misc. Unpub. Poetry, Box 1, F24, exercise book, p.46. The MS is undated but is most likely to have been completed in 1943, during the period in which he was frequently composing Nervous Songs.

<sup>38</sup> Sharon Bryan, ‘Hearing Voices: John Berryman’s Translation of Private Vision into Public Song’, in *Recovering Berryman*, pp.141-50 (p.144).

speaker may or may not be the voice of the poet. Either way, it constitutes a paradoxical attempt to develop a more personalised form of poetic impersonality.

This ambiguity begins with the voice of the authorial prologist in the first two lines: the impression is that of the poet pondering the meaning of the day in question. In the natural, conversational tone of the developing persona, he dwells in a progressive train of thought on the events after the Crucifixion. After fleetingly considering his first thought—that of Christ’s oblivious sleep in death—his mind wanders on to another possibility: that the tradition of Christ’s descent into hell may be true. Faith in either position appears somewhat irresolute, but the latter opens out into a visionary first-person depiction of a damned soul’s experience of that visit. According to Catholic tradition, Christ experienced the totality of human death, which included a descent into the abode of the dead. There, as Saviour for all time, he freed the souls of the virtuous who had died before him, whilst leaving the damned to their everlasting fate.<sup>39</sup> In the *Inferno*, this momentous past event hangs sorrowfully in the memory of all who remember it, and were not released.<sup>40</sup> Berryman, however, depicts the plight of the ‘shade’—an inhabitant of the underworld—at the actual time of Christ’s sojourn there, which creates an even greater sense of spiritual urgency.

Once again we are reminded of the way in which hell is also being created on earth, with the sound of war pounding overhead, so providing an intensifying backdrop of despair, as well as a great influx of newly deceased souls. As the poem develops, it appears increasingly to be an allegorical scenario of personal despair. For someone who failed the draft, and lived safely away from any major areas of conflict, the war was not

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<sup>39</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), pp.144-45.

<sup>40</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Mark Musa, 3 vols (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1984-86), 1: *Inferno* (1984), pp.98-99 (IV.31-63).

usually in the foreground of his concerns. This is reflected by the often token background presence of the war in his early verse, and, here, the ongoing nightmare of distant populations soon gives way to his own more private and immediate anguish. The main focus of his despair is the body of concerns which become very familiar from an overview of these religious poems as a whole: principally his crippling sense of failure as a husband, a lover, an artist, and as one who cannot rise in faith to the necessary demands and challenges of following Christ.

In 'Holy Saturday' the speaker is portrayed as being amongst the very worst of sinners, as is indicated by the nature of his *contrapasso*—his divine retribution— derived from the *Inferno*. In Dante's epic, hell is terraced in a series of descending circles, inhabited by various categories of sinners who experience an elaborate punishment appropriate to the species of their sin. The description of the speaker's predicament suggests that he is also, as with the fate of Timothy, frozen in Cocytus—the great ice-lake surrounding Lucifer—in the lowest region, the eleventh circle, of hell, which is at the centre of the earth. It is the place reserved for the traitorous, who find themselves, to varying degrees, embedded in the ice, many with just their heads above the surface, others completely submerged.<sup>41</sup> As becomes apparent, the voice is of one who feels he has in some way betrayed his wife, his God, and himself.

The description of the 'husband & wife estranged', with 'their despairs crossed', recalls the plight of Napoleone and Alessandro of Mangona; they are the two brothers who killed each other during a quarrel, and who are condemned to spend eternity frozen together in each other's arms, inescapably embraced in their mutual enmity.<sup>42</sup> The image depicts the scenario of being trapped in a loveless destructive marriage, where

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<sup>41</sup> *Inferno*, XXXI. 123 – XXXIV.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, XXXII. 40 – 60.

despair has become reciprocated. The poet's marital conflicts often resulted from the natural tension between his ambitious literary pursuits, which required dedicated solitude, and the more selfless conduct required to make a marriage work.

Consequently, creative and professional failure would lead to resentment towards his wife, which in turn resulted in guilt, and a feeling that he was also falling short as a husband.<sup>43</sup> This is exacerbated by the fact that he also feels incapable of embracing the faith which Eileen possesses, heightening his despair to one of eternal dimensions, where death, rather than being a release, could deliver the eschatological consequences of his failure to commit in this life. This is the vicious circle which is constantly represented in the poetry of the period, as his sense of defeat in all the areas of his life becomes combined into one solid block of agony that lacks the resilient wit and pathos he would achieve through Henry in *The Dream Songs*.

The predicament of the damned soul in 'Holy Saturday' alludes to this whole range of fears and preoccupations. The extreme bodily discomforts of the ice are certainly suggestive of his physical anxieties of the time: the itchy 'scalp decaying' which suggested to him rapid balding, and the sexual insecurities suggested by the 'cold weight near the thighs', which also indicates his physical proximity to Lucifer, who resides, with lower half submerged, in the centre of Cocytus.<sup>44</sup> In her memoir, Eileen Simpson remarks on the inordinate extent to which Berryman worried about his apparent hair loss, and its implications: 'After a while I realized that nothing I said could reassure him for long. This loss had symbolic significance. He associated it with loss of potency and—an even greater threat—loss of potency as an artist.'<sup>45</sup> Indeed, his own diary entry, written in late 1944, demonstrates how the morbid self-loathing

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<sup>43</sup> See Haffenden, *Life of Berryman*, pp.141-47.

<sup>44</sup> *Inferno*, XXXIV.

<sup>45</sup> Eileen Simpson, *Poets in their Youth: A Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), pp.87-88.

became all-consuming, and how his poetry was increasingly becoming a more immediate and transparent vehicle for it:

Extreme gloom. The end of my 30<sup>th</sup> year. I may do something hereafter, or later something something [sic] already done may show as worth while, —but it does not appear so. My talent lost, like my hair, sex crumbling like my scalp. Disappointment & horror. And the collapse of will: self-distrust, contempt, sloth, & paralysis. Everything begun . . . everything abandoned. Every day I wish to die.<sup>46</sup>

Together with the ‘hunger & failure’ of the scarcely published poet, this provides for a cocktail of misery sufficient to enable him to hear the calling voice of the Saviour. The ice-encased shade, unable to free himself to accompany Christ out of hell, consequently becomes a disturbing metaphor for his spiritual procrastination. As in the Christmas song, the final stanza features the kind of inquisitive, searching address to God that would later become characteristic of his devotional verse. It expresses an imperfect, and consequently very human, faith, as he attempts to address his subject whilst in the process of attempting to understand both Him and himself. Here he attempts to make sense of his own afflictions, by considering the Christian meaning of suffering: that it can be a means of sharing in Christ’s passion, and that carrying one’s cross, even if stumbling along the way, has an important salvific function.

The speaker is portrayed as being on the threshold of embracing this concept, but lacks the willpower—represented by his frozen state—to ‘rise’ and follow Christ; consequently, his suffering ‘has nothing in view’, since he cannot gain from it any purpose. The poem ends on a note of open desperation, with the reiterated appeal to Christ for saving grace through help and guidance. The emphatic nature of his pleading is accentuated by the anaphoric nature of the last verse, with its relentless and world-

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<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Haffenden, *Life of Berryman*, p.156.

weary reiteration of 'pain' and 'take up again', and the accelerated rhyming triplets. It is most likely that 'ten years' alludes to the period of time since he stopped attending church, when he went to Columbia College in 1932 and 'all that sort of dropped out'.<sup>47</sup>

The reader is left uncertain as to whether the elusive Christ will hear or respond to this closing appeal. The image of the damned and frozen shade, however, is a far from optimistic conceit to encapsulate his indecision, since it implies an eternal predicament.

In fact the answer comes, to a certain extent, in a sonnet which is intended to accompany 'Holy Saturday', and which, through the identification of his wife, confirms the extent to which he associates himself with the damned shade:

Save— I pray, bowing my broken head—  
 My wife, for her virtue, out of this alive,  
 Alive I mean in Grace; tears we have shed  
 As prayers for her let at Your feet arrive;  
 Consider the trials, her sister's and her own  
 And mine, which by Your will shatter her sense;  
 Her husband's failure visit on him alone,  
 His disappointment be her penitence,—  
 His agony her confirmation there  
 Where in that choir her voice was always sweet:  
 Never until now did she despair,  
 Christ's child, Eileen—and if my head must beat  
 The wall in terror, take that pitiful blood  
 With Christ's blood, to receive her. She is good.

My blasphemy and pride forgive  
 Also if it be Thy will, who live in pain  
 To no end: but bring her into Thy love again.<sup>48</sup>

Both poems were carefully handwritten onto adjacent pages of an exercise book. The sonnet continues the scenario of the ice-encased shade, bound also with his wife, and he now pleads for her release at his own expense. He conveys an attitude of traditional Christian piety in the offering up of his suffering, if rather self-pityingly, for the

<sup>47</sup> Stitt, 'Art of Poetry, *Berryman's Understanding*, p.41.

<sup>48</sup> U Minn, JBP, Misc. Unpub. Poetry, Box 1, F24. MS, exercise book, p.47.

expiation of another's sin. He appears to acknowledge himself as a hopeless case, but offers whatever merit he might still achieve to sustain instead the faith of Eileen through God's saving grace. However, this expression of supreme husbandly devotion is somewhat undermined by his attempt to turn self-destruction into a heroic virtue. His threatened suicide, in the style of Pier Delle Vigne, is offered as a rather petulant sacrifice for his wife's salvation.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, the tone of the poem becomes that of a melodramatic cry for attention, but it also seems to convey an implicit plea for the strength not to inflict his own misery and frustration upon Eileen. The tone is also at times striking in its similarity to the devotional verse of 'Eleven Addresses to the Lord' and *Delusions, etc* some twenty five years later; the reverence and humility imparted in the additional closing tercet is particularly suggestive of them. Fortunately, he would overcome his morbid self-loathing sufficiently to complete 'Canto Amor' a year later in 1944: it became a paean which represents a more poetically accomplished, as well as less self-destructive, expression of conjugal love and religious doubt.

Several other holy sonnets of the period bewail the same state of affairs. It seems that after laying aside the Nervous Song format, Berryman was increasingly turning to the sonnet form as a versatile and immediate vessel to pour his experience into. Over the three days of 20-22 March 1944—around the same time he finished 'Canto Amor'—he composed two more related sonnets expressing the familiarly unabating theme of guilt and failure. Although they are not accomplished poems, they demonstrate the emergence of another very important stylistic development: that of dialogism:

I

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. *Inferno*, XIII, 58-78 (pp.186-89, 192).

That burden is heavy which I bear. I know.  
 Five years, disease which makes me doubt my heart,  
 All my feelings may be false. It is so.  
 The honour & love early I brought to Art  
 Dry under disappointments, and crack; distrust  
 Palsies my hand as I would write: my guilt  
 I feel is great. Feel it so if you must.  
 Why why? Life was a spate in me; I sang  
 weddings all night on fire until I fell  
 Tired in the dawn; I told the truth; the music rang  
 The one faith I knew. Look back, now, hear the bell  
Tolling for pride wherein you sang & raved.  
 My wife is torn with me. She will be saved.

## II

Pride—which Dante & Yeats & Milton felt,  
 The pillars of their tongues on other men  
 Lowering! They say so, but they knelt  
In desolation & love, rose, knelt again,  
And wrote. But this poverty of heart!  
Patience and faith. Sexual power lost—  
 Unwanted all my work—what can I say  
 O how behave to my dear? Now you can start.  
 Start what, how? Listen, for the Holy Ghost  
Sometimes will whisper; also fall & pray—  
 Pray whom? I promised nothing; and I speak  
Out of my Grace. Question me not. Go:  
With what is given you – You are most weak –  
Work what you can, be grateful. I know, I know.<sup>50</sup>

He attempts in these sonnets the kind of ‘schizophrenic’ dialogue with his conscience that would later manifest itself through the use of Anne Bradstreet and Henry’s blackface friend. The interlocutor—whose responses are underlined in the manuscript—resembles that of a stern, but calming confessor: the voice of his Catholic conscience. The plaintive voice of the speaker seems largely devoid of irony, which is why the confessor does add an element of self-awareness, without which the poem may resemble a mere outpouring of self-indulgent misery. The querulous poet can consequently be cast against the steadier aspect of his personality, a double-act that would be developed with a great degree of self-parody in *The Dream Songs*. As a matter

<sup>50</sup> U Minn, JBP, Unpub. Misc. Poetry, Box 2, Folder 31, #58, MS. Both poems record 20 March 1944 as being their composition date, with revisions on 22 March.

of fact, a strange Henryism does incongruously emerge in the second sonnet, with the rather camp, syntactically disordered exclamation: ‘O how behave to my dear’.

The poem’s dialogic features, however, are one of its few innovations, and it certainly lacks the creative syntax of some of the better *Dispossessed* works. The sonnet form is not yet as masterfully employed as it would be later in the decade, when he successfully exploits the tension between imitation and deviation in his use of literary convention. The first sonnet, English in form, is incomplete, as it requires an additional line. In the second he employs an interesting hybrid of forms; he deviates from the Shakespearian quatrain, established at the outset, to enclose a Petrarchan sestet between a second alternatively rhymed quatrain (ababcdedcdefgfg). However, little is made of the form in structuring the movement of the dialogue, which in itself is too sombrous and chastening to invigorate it.

The sonnets deal with what he purports to be the greatest of all his sins, that of ‘pride’, which he feels has not been justified by his meagre literary achievements. The interlocutor—his voice of often hopeless reason—bluntly affirms his predicament in the first poem, before pointing out what he already appears to realise: that the *joie de vivre* he once experienced—where he ‘sang / weddings all night on fire’—was merely the result of a yet-to-be-humbled state of haughty delusion. In the second sonnet, however, he is reminded that his favourite literary forebears also had to experience ‘desolation’ and be humbled, before they got down and wrote the works which would establish them. ‘Patience and faith’ is needed for him to make best use of his suffering in this way, and turn his great anguish into great art. Christian faith almost seems to become an allegory in this poem for faith in oneself; lack of success is represented as being an arduous part of the artistic pilgrimage to eventual fame.

However, he does attempt to portray the dynamics of Christian faith; the voice informs him that conversion is only possible if he allows the Holy Ghost to work through him, and actively seeks to encourage such an encounter. The poet's further questioning appears to meet a brick wall of blind faith; the voice is able to speak only 'out of my Grace', and in frustration sends him on to work gratefully with what he has been given. The short sequence comes full circle with the repetition of the opening line's affirmation of self-knowledge, ultimately offering the poet no respite from the source of his despair if he is not able, or willing, to believe. The source of this spiritual impotence is revealed to be his pride, but pride is also something he associates with fuelling his literary endeavours, and he is reluctant to relinquish it. He must accept that in the end pride is self-defeating, and that creativity derives from a power which one is not always in control of, and which, if he is to succeed, he must humble himself to. That power can come partly in the form of suffering, itself one of the most potent forces of inspiration.

Important to these poems, especially the 'Holy Saturday' sonnet, is the protective attitude he displays towards the faith of his wife. Eileen Simpson, in her memoir of the poet, describes Berryman's encouraging attitude towards her continuing religious practice within their marriage: 'John and I didn't know any Catholics, and many of our friends were openly antagonistic to religion. John was not. Although he was unable to believe, it was very important to him that I should'.<sup>51</sup> In some ways, he appeared to be practising the faith by proxy, and the grave insecurity he depicts when her faith also seems in jeopardy, reflects, not just marital devotion, but also the fear of severing his connection with the possibility that he too can yet be saved.

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<sup>51</sup> Simpson, *Poets in their Youth*, p.130.

In another sonnet, gloomily titled ‘On a Failure’, the poet does at least offer himself some cause for optimism in this direction:

What if the idiots and their friend  
 Malice have now denied  
 Your entrance at the top  
 Of the bloody hill, the end  
 Your passionate footing looked for  
 Both as you went up  
 And long before you saw that hill—  
 Still, still nothing: they have tried  
 And tried in vain to cast  
 You down to that abyss  
 That ineluctable place  
 Whence none return, despair;  
 Still you turn upward, still  
 As the tide battles the last  
 Inch of shore, you go up with the tide.<sup>52</sup>

The sonnet form itself here has been cleverly adapted to rise to the poem’s thematic demands. He elongates the form to fifteen lines, but also metrically curtails the lines into a trimeter template. In conjunction with this steepening device, the occasional, mostly delayed rhyme accentuates the arduousness of his journey to the summit of ambition. He depicts a rare instance of defiant hope, however, as he takes on the world that has so far denied him the success he passionately craves. Despite the churlish ill grace he feels towards ‘the idiots and their friend / Malice’, the poem culminates on a very positive and reassuring image. The speaker remarks on the ultimate failure of failure itself, and the ‘tide’ that will always take one back up once the battering is over: an ascension in which little exertion or anxiety is ultimately required. As is usual in these poems, hell is an allegory for his current state of life, as well as the real possibility of eternal separation from God. The conclusion indicates his faith in a power beyond

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<sup>52</sup> U Minn, JBP, Unpub. Misc. Poetry, Box 2, F32, #21, TS. The TS is undated, but is collected with other dated poems from the early 1940s. The form, style and treatment of subject matter, also all suggest it is from this period.

himself, which will eventually raise him up, both poetically and spiritually, to the point where he will be saved from 'despair', both in this life and the hereafter.

### **'The Epistemology of Loss' in Poetry and Prose**

Important parallels exist between Berryman's prose and poetic output of the period, and the development of both is often interrelated. In particular, it is evident that his use of the ambiguous pronoun evolved out of the narrative levels and character focalisations of his short story writing. Subtle stratifications of the conscious centre would enable him to achieve both intense involvement in, and reflection on, an emotional instance, within the short unfolding space of a single poem. This is demonstrated, for instance, in the affinity between 'The Ball Poem', one of his breakthrough works of *The Dispossessed*, and the unpublished short story 'Our Sins Are More Than We Can Bear', which was written during his time at Princeton. Both works recreate an early epiphanic moment in a child's process of maturity, but one whose consequences only contribute to the lasting predicament of adulthood, where innocence can no longer be an assuaging factor. In this way, the poet turns his attention to evolutionary depictions of an individual's existential knowledge, a necessary aspect of which concerns the source of theistic belief and awareness.

'Our Sins Are More Than We Can Bear' concerns the disturbing spiritual awakening of a young boy, Tanker, resulting from a childish conflict with his elder brother, Richard. It begins with the two brothers watching a jellyfish which they decide to try to catch with a rope. Tanker possesses a toy wagon at home and he suggests they fetch the rope attached to that. However, after various excuses, and after trying to obtain a rope from

another source, Richard is forced to admit to Tanker that his beloved wagon has been irreparably destroyed. He had taken it out the previous evening, without informing his brother, and was forced to abandon it under a tree when it began raining heavily.

Unfortunately, the garbage truck had crushed the wagon before he had had a chance to retrieve it the next morning. Incensed by this news, Tanker violently attacks his brother, attempting to push him over the edge of the cliff and into the sea, but he is easily overpowered and restrained by the elder boy. Burning with indignation, Tanker leaves his brother—who is also left desolate with sorrow—to go and to seek justice from his grandmother. However, the sick, elderly woman is in too much discomfort to pay him any attention, and the boy makes a petulant judgemental outburst towards her which immediately terrifies him.

Throughout the course of the story, Berryman portrays the boy's growing self-awareness of the process of consciousness, including his relation to the rest of nature and what is beyond him. This is demonstrated, for instance, in the passage where Tanker and his brother are by the coast, attempting to catch a jellyfish washed up by the sea:

‘I don't know so much about jelly-fish.’ Richard admitted. ‘Not to catch one.’  
‘We might try.’ Tanker was losing interest in the subject.

Emerald and white under the sun the Atlantic boiled up a deep trough in the great rocks till it lay suddenly calm, not much farther than Tanker was tall, below the ledge where the boys squatted. Then it sank away lashing. I wonder if it's always the same water runs in, thought Tanker. He squinted with a problem. How messy the wash was! The filthy pearl of the medusa [the jelly fish] fell helplessly with the brine, weltering, and rose, and fell. Sub-umbral muscles were contracting tinily. Rosy, the center of the living saucer glowed. With anger? Did the big medusa feel this stranding among straws and flotsam as an affront? Probably not. Did it understand that it was hideous, hateful? No. And to whom would any such understanding matter? No, it rose and fell.

‘Let's pitch a rock on it.’ said Tanker lazily, but Richard had scrambled away and Tanker leaned back, avoiding a tiny pool of rainwater, opening his eyes very wide straight on the sun and then clamping them shut to watch the fiery circles disappear.

What were those pictures in the air you saw at night? He must remember to ask Nanny. He stretched out his legs. The sun flowed up and down on them slowly. Hell was hot, not Heaven. Could it be so bad to be hot? Well—all over it would. And Hell was where the Devil was. Oh yes. That was awful.<sup>53</sup>

This emerging self-consciousness is achieved through an intricately representative focalisation, in which the authorial voice of poetic description oscillates effortlessly with free indirect discourse, and is contained within the authentic limitations of childhood understanding. Furthermore, the development of this understanding is depicted in a convincingly systematic Piagetian manner. Tanker finds himself wandering from the worldly concerns of the childish game into an ocean of existential uncertainty. He begins to formulate a distinction between different levels of creatures, and their relationship with the rest of creation and its Creator. He begins to contemplate the process of nature in relation to the tide of the sea; then how the creatures within it are at the mercy of this process. He concludes that the jellyfish, unlike himself, does not possess self-consciousness; it cannot experience the apparent degradation of its treatment; it is not aware of the feelings of revulsion or intrigue others feel towards it, nor can it respond with emotions of its own. It simply ‘rose and fell’ subject to the tide, which itself is subject to the infinitely wider laws of creation that govern it. The boy turns his attention to his own relationship with those laws, contemplating the reaction his mind and body make to the rays of the sun.

This leads him to contemplate the source of existence, and its eventual consummation in the eternal states of heaven and hell; this reaffirms his innate awareness of death, his understanding of good and evil, and the necessity of avoiding the latter. Consequently, this observation and formulation of the natural law includes a moral dimension, which

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<sup>53</sup> U Minn, JBP, Prose Works (Unpublished) Fiction, Box 3, ‘Our Sins Are More Than We Can Bear’. TS (7pp), p.2. The typescript is undated, but includes the address: ‘120 Prospect Avenue, Princeton, N.J’. Berryman consecutively resided at two different apartments at this address during his years at Princeton, from 1943 to 1953. See Haffenden, *Life of Berryman*, pp.153-55.

has important implications for the subsequent events of the story. Unlike the jelly fish, Tanker has become attached to material possessions—in this case the wagon—but he also comes to realise that humans too are at the mercy of nature, when the rain forces his brother to abandon his beloved toy, and it is left exposed to the destructive force of the garbage truck.

Moreover, again in contrast to the sea creature, he must confront his disturbing ability to respond with frustration, hatred and violence towards the external agencies which influence and impinge upon his life, and to make value judgements about them. As he walks home following the incident with his brother, he remarks how ‘life was one insult’ (p5). The conclusion of the story concerns the possibility of finding an ultimate recourse against the experience of these apparently insulting wrongs. However, committing a further act of injustice himself, he goes to report the actions of his brother to his grandmother, with the intention of having a vindictive and unreasonable punishment inflicted upon him:

‘I am very unwell today, Rufus,’ said his grandmother in a low painful voice. ‘You will have to go away.’

He gulped. ‘You’ve just got to not—’

‘No,’ she said, turning her face slightly.

Tanker felt as if he were undergoing a general convulsion, as if incomprehensible events were driving him toward some hopeless issue. The injustice of the world was clear to him. His heart iced. The sunlight drifted in at a distant window, heatless and senseless. The little boy spread his legs and looked up at his grandmother across the bed.

‘When you die,’ he said slowly, ‘I hope you go to Hell.’

Then the air was a scream, tearing at him from somewhere, from the bed,—another,—screams tearing and beating him backward toward the door horrified. The room seemed to howl while he fought his way blindly into the hall. With his arms about his head he plunged away crouching. Still out of the door behind him came the terrible screams.

When one bright morning later—a year? two years?—he learnt from Nanny at breakfast of his grandmother’s death, Tanker looked down and felt the iron enter into he soul. He knew that he had killed her and killed her soul. He did not only feel guilty but scared. It was a long time before he could remember his grandmother without feeling scared, and

longer before he could remember her without feeling guilty; but then, as time went on, he remembered her less and less.<sup>54</sup>

Through the act of making his own damning pronouncement, the boy in an instant learns the power of that final judgement, and consequently fears that he may have conferred judgement upon himself. He is also terrified by the apparent omnipotence of his thought, suspecting that the condemnation of his grandmother has been granted, that 'he had killed her and killed her soul'. Through usurping the prerogative of God, he has come to learn the awesome disparity between the evil of human frailty, and the infallibility of divine mercy. He had declared to his own grandmother the ultimate rejection, and senses the consequences have been fatal in regard to her own will to live. The closing line is highly evocative in its understated plainness, suggesting more than time's natural assuagement of emotional pain. Underlined by the story's title, it also leaves the suggestion of lasting unconscious trauma, since, for the reader, the experience is as immediate as a recalled memory, and the subsequent passage of time too briefly recounted to be distanced from it. However, the title can also appear somewhat ironic in the light of the memory's withdrawal, suggesting the development of a natural callousness towards the source of his fear, and towards his grandmother.

A similarly cruel loss of innocence is depicted in 'The Ball Poem', written in March 1941.<sup>55</sup> Once again the poet recognises the power of isolating a fundamental condition of human existence, through the portrayal of a child's first experience of it.

What is the boy now, who has lost his ball,  
 What, what is he to do? I saw it go  
 Merrily bouncing, down the street, and then  
 Merrily over—there it is in the water!  
 No use to say 'O there are other balls':

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, pp.6-7.

<sup>55</sup> As dated by Mariani, *Dream Song*, pp.133-34.

An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy  
 As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down  
 All his young days into the harbour where  
 His ball went. I would not intrude on him,  
 A dime, another ball, is worthless. Now  
 He senses first responsibility  
 In a world of possessions. People will take balls,  
 Balls will be lost always, little boy,  
 And no one buys a ball back. Money is external.  
 He is learning, well behind his desperate eyes,  
 The epistemology of loss, how to stand up  
 Knowing what every man must one day know  
 And most know many days, how to stand up  
 And gradually light returns to the street,  
 A whistle blows, the ball is out of sight,  
 Soon part of me will explore the deep and dark  
 Floor of the harbour . . . I am everywhere,  
 I suffer and move, my mind and my heart move  
 With all that move me, under the water  
 Or whistling, I am not a little boy.<sup>56</sup>

Here, Berryman forsakes the paramountcy and rigidity of form for a more fluid verse, which carries the process of experience and reflection through the dynamics of personality. Several critics have seen the tonal development of the poem as problematic: the way it shifts from that of a humoured onlooker of the boy's plight—whose discourse, it is suggested, incorporates 'bawdy puns'—to the darkly profound utterances of a 'Whitmanic pantheistic presence'.<sup>57</sup> However, this tonal shift demonstrates the poet's newfound ability to transfer from the conversational to the authorial voice, in a way that renders experience both intensely personal and universal. This movement also represents a crucial moment in the progression of the boy's self-awareness, and the fact that the moment is a second-hand encounter—through the observation of the speaker—allows a discourse that is both empathic and transcendent. The boy's experience is *his* experience, is *our* experience; it is 'the epistemology of loss'. As Berryman remarks: 'the poet himself is both left out and put in; the boy does and does not become him and

<sup>56</sup> Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p.11.

<sup>57</sup> Conarroe, *John Berryman*, pp.36-37; Linebarger, *John Berryman*, p.46-47.

we are confronted with a process which is at once a process of life and a process of art.<sup>58</sup>

There is not enough space in a poem of this length and intensity for the centre of consciousness actually to enter the child, as it does in the story 'Our Sins'; however, the ambiguity of identity is an affective counterpart to the narrative levels which are more familiar to prose. Indeed, his excursions into the long narrative poem with 'Homage' would enable him to experiment with more sharply defined, but still symbiotic, divisions between the voices of character and poet. This is one of the first instances in Berryman's poetry where a more authentic representation of consciousness interplays with art's requirement to go beyond that space. The apparent transfer of voice marked by the 'Whitmanic presence' at the end does not convey the same kind of cosmic-ranging ego as does Whitman's speaker; rather, it is the expression of the same speaker's sense of powerlessness before the tyranny of emotion, and its antecedents, where 'my mind and my heart move / With all that move me'.

It represents the climax of an insight which has already begun before the opening line's entrance into the midst of the episode. We are introduced right into the middle of the trivial, but devastatingly profound, incident; the speaker having to recall the brief course of the ball's witnessed journey. Like Tanker, in 'Our Sins', he comes quickly to learn what separates humanity from other created beings and objects. As the jellyfish was oblivious to the attitudes and devices of the children, the ball almost takes on a taunting life of its own, its reiterated 'merriment' being in marked contrast to the 'ultimate shaking grief' of the boy. He learns something more important and grave than the pitfalls of merely material attachment; 'money is external', but 'the epistemology of

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<sup>58</sup> Berryman, 'One Answer to a Question: Changes', *Freedom of the Poet*, pp.326-27.

loss' in all its forms, through to the ultimate loss of life itself, is inescapably and deeply internal; it is now 'well behind his desperate eyes'. In both 'Our Sins' and 'The Ball Poem', the narrator's affirmation of what is an inexorable element of adult self-knowledge is powerfully attained through the portrayal of its first realisation, when that awareness is in its rawest and most unassuaged state.

These works constitute two further examples of the spiritual impulse in Berryman's early work; they portray the exposure of man's elemental dilemma in the face of certainties which require radical decisions. Such representations would increasingly be related to matters of fundamental theology and the quest for the historical face of Christianity. The creation of a more translucent voice and consistent persona are important factors in the depiction of this exploration. As the poems which didn't make *The Dispossessed* suggest, the urgency of the faith question existed as strongly during the late 1930s and 1940s, as it did during the time it more publicly manifested itself in 'Homage' and *The Dream Songs*, but its expression was inhibited by stylistic considerations. Brydon remarks that 'Berryman had been trained and trained himself to use a formal, distanced speaking voice, one addressed primarily to a faceless audience. Only gradually did he discover that the voice of his own best poems was to be a personal, autobiographical singing voice.'<sup>59</sup> This is true to a certain extent; however, the evidence rather suggests that Berryman felt the creative necessity of writing a more explicitly autobiographical verse very early on during this formal period. He was simply attempting to discover the best way of voicing it.

Published verses such as 'Canto Amor' and 'The Ball Poem' convey a rhetorical conviction that the less successful, unpublished confessional poems, such as his holy

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<sup>59</sup> Brydon, 'Hearing Voices', in *Recovering Berryman*, p.146.

sonnets, lack. The fact that the hidden verse demonstrates idiosyncrasies that are only just emerging goes a long way to explain why he felt too inhibited to release them. Consequently, innovations in style would lead to the freeing of this religious expression, in the same way that it would liberate the more direct expression of other personal matter. This all comes together most clearly in *Berryman's Sonnets*, with the crisis of conscience that was prompted by his adulterous affair. By then the whole range of devices that we associate with his mature poetry was increasingly defining his style, and his verse was finally becoming a more direct and cathartic medium for his pressing concerns. The identity suggested by the pronoun would also be much less ambiguous in the *Sonnets*. However, even these were withheld from the public arena until nearly twenty years after their composition, and it may not just have been simple discretion, in respect for those involved, which necessitated this. Despite the undoubted quality of the sequence, there may also have still been some inhibition over such a public exposition of the 'I', at least until his reputation as a poet was so well established that it could withstand virtually anything.

There may also have been some degree of reserve over the religious subject matter itself, as the representation of such a conflict of faith was certainly something that singled him out from his intellectual peers. Eileen Simpson recalls how 'John and I didn't know any Catholics, and many of our friends were openly antagonistic to religion.'<sup>60</sup> Two exceptions to this, however, came in the shape of Robert Lowell, and his wife Jean Stafford: both committed writers, as well as committed Catholics. Lowell had converted to Catholicism in 1941, and had become almost notorious amongst associates for his fervent piety.<sup>61</sup> He was still gripped by the zeal of a convert when he and Berryman initiated their long-standing friendship in 1946, after meeting at a party

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<sup>60</sup> Simpson, *Poets in their Youth*, p.131.

<sup>61</sup> See Paul Mariani, *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell* (London: Norton, 1994), pp.92-109.

for Randall Jarrell in New York.<sup>62</sup> Shortly after, the Berrymans spent a week with the Lowells at their home in Maine, during which time Lowell introduced his fellow poet to such books as *The Cloud of Unknowing*, by the anonymous fourteenth century mystic, and F. J. Sheed and Maisie Ward's *Catholic Evidence*, a work in which Berryman took a particular interest.<sup>63</sup> However, the events of the following year would lead to a far more turbulent confrontation with the demands of the faith, and exacerbate his conflict of will, as he embarked on his first marital infidelity. Ironically, it would be the making of him as a poet.

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<sup>62</sup> The occasion is documented in *Lost Puritan*, p.136.

<sup>63</sup> See Haffenden, *Life of Berryman*, pp.160-61; F. J. Sheed and Maisie Ward, *Catholic Evidence: Training Outlines*, 4th edn (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939); *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counselling*, ed by Phyllis Hodgson (London: Oxford University Press, 1944).

## Chapter 2

### Troubled Troubadour: Concupiscence and Conscience

#### in *Berryman's Sonnets*

The sequence entitled 'Sonnets to Chris'—written covertly in 1947 and first published as *Berryman's Sonnets* twenty years later—marks an important transitional period in John Berryman's development as a poet. Composed during the short turbulent course of an extra-marital affair, the experience provided the perfect subject, as well as impetus, for a new style of verse with more explicit exposition of the private voice. After a great deal of experimentation—mostly by way of verse which never saw the light of day—he finally developed a poetic idiom with which he could confidently convey such openly autobiographical matter to a readership. Even if that public airing was somewhat delayed—a withholding necessitated by respect towards those involved—*Sonnets* certainly merited it. His new poetic *sprachgefühl* was achieved through a combination of devices that came to characterise his most famous works: there is the seemingly-erratic disordering of syntax; the unusual diction, original in its diversity, with its mix of archaisms, colloquialisms and neologisms; there is also the unselfconscious, often ironic, but highly erudite parade of learning, with its classical, literary, biblical and historical allusions, representing an inventive search to shape the allegory of his experience. He was captivated enough by the form, and the mode of the voice that filled it, to complete up to one hundred and eleven sonnets in the first instance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As Charles Thornbury explains, Sonnets 107, 112-17 in *Collected Poems* were later additions to the sequence, written in 1966; however, 115 and 116 were delivered to the publisher too late to make it into *Berryman's Sonnets*.

The compositional history of *Sonnets* is relatively complex, as there are two assembled versions of it from 1947-48: firstly, there is the original typescript (TS-1) with HW corrections from the period; secondly, there is the carbon typescript (CTS-1), which is the TS Berryman amended in 1966 for publication. As well as a number of corrections, mostly to various names of people and places, he wrote six additional new poems, four of which made it into the 1966 publication. He did not use the other corrected typescript (TS-1) at all for *Sonnets*. For *Collected Poems*, however, Thornbury chooses to use TS-1, although he

These developments are also significant for the religious concerns of Berryman's poetry, continuing more dramatically the representation of what would be an ongoing struggle with Christianity. *Sonnets* does not feature the critical examination of the faith that would be such a major component of *The Dream Songs*, but, for the most part, that is beyond its remit; it is concerned with the faith to the extent that it impinges on his relationship with Chris. This gravely influences his attitude towards the relationship, however, since it is in religious terms that his guilt over the infidelity is expressed. The Judaeo-Christian concept of 'the Law' looms over him as a dark impediment to any satisfaction from the affair; it is a mostly latent, though sometimes intrusively brash, source of anxiety that frequently emerges throughout the sonnets. The poet has to confront adultery, not just as a social taboo, but also as a personal taboo, and his response to this genuine and sustained crisis of conscience is to develop an elaborate and consistently evolving trope. His sense of moral transgression is portrayed first and foremost as a transgression against 'the Law'.

Linebarger remarks how the conflict in the sequence 'between the law of love and the religious law' becomes one of the inner disputes that arise in him as a result of the affair, and how this 'law of love' becomes his 'Faith'.<sup>2</sup> This notion of the poet being confronted with the possibility of an alternative faith is one that Berryman develops into the most sustained and important motif of the sequence. The 'faith' takes a variety of forms—embracing pagan, profane and mythological imagery—but all stand opposed to the constant counterpoint of the Christian faith, represented for the most part by imagery from the Old Testament. The faith of love is the one the poet desires to follow.

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also includes all the sonnets not included in this and those added later. See Berryman, *Collected Poems*, pp.303-06. Since I am mainly concerned with Berryman's intentions during the late 1940s at this point, I have chosen to use the versions as they stand in *Collected Poems*.

<sup>2</sup> Linebarger, *John Berryman*, p.55.

but the Judaeo-Christian Law becomes the oppressive obstacle of conscience to the uninhibited practice of this faith. The clash between the faiths fundamentally represents a clash of wills: God's will, manifest as His Law, versus the poet's will, symbolised by his own law. Berryman also portrays this conflict by way of a highly informed and often parodic use of the two associated traditions of his chosen genre: courtly love and the sonnet form. During the historical development of the former, there emerged a variance between its conventions, which became identified as adulterous in nature, and Christian morality.<sup>3</sup> *Sonnets* is also concerned with adulterous love, and his treatment of the convention is both to play up to, and intensify, this conflict. In consequence, the anguish of a tormented conscience becomes the main characteristic of the sonnets' language of romantic love.

C. S. Lewis, in his classic study of the courtly love tradition, defined its special form of love as being enumerated by 'Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love.'<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Alexander J. Denomy cites 'the conception of love as desire, the ennobling force of love and the cult of the beloved' as the three basic principles that set courtly love apart from other types of love.<sup>5</sup> 'True love', from the point of view of the troubadours and other proponents of the tradition, is always adulterous in nature; it can never exist within marriage because marriage is between equals, where affection, duty and necessity, replace desire. Desire itself dwindles when the man no longer has a goal. For love to be true, the beloved must, on the contrary, remain the man's superior; the element of choice is also important because the love must be a 'reward freely given by a

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp.61-62.

<sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), p.2.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander J. Denomy, *The Heresy of Courtly Love* (New York: McMullen, 1947), p.21.

lady, and only our superiors can reward'. Furtiveness and jealousy are also important constituents, and these are far more likely to be found in the adulterous relationship.<sup>6</sup>

All these elements are assimilated, parodied or inverted by Berryman through the course of the sonnets. The notion of the 'cult of the beloved', however, is one principle he imports from the tradition that he attaches special importance to, incorporating it into the sequence's central religious trope of the conflict between the two faiths. The veneration of his beloved is portrayed in a variety of ways, but he presents an ascending and often ironic scale of devotion which attains to the level of idolatry, and, as it comes into conflict with his religious conscience, profanity. The fact that adulterous love becomes a religion in its own right introduces an additional level of dramatic gravity to his duel with God; the poet goes beyond the notion of mere 'sin', taking it to the level of 'heresy'. Whereas the profane faith is a motif in the sonnets, as is its rivalry with Christianity, the Christian faith itself is more than that, since it is demonstrated in a number of sonnets to be the source of his anxiety, the root of the moral conscience that disturbs him. He rides with the courtly love tradition, but is unable to either reconcile or disregard the conflict with Christianity, unlike his troubadour forebears.

### **The Uses of a Profane Faith**

One must distinguish at the outset between Berryman's use of pagan religion and mythology as an 'allegory of love' and its use as a recusant demonstration of moral transgression. In Sonnet 65, for instance, the deification of his mistress forms a trope of great subtlety and beauty, and he uses the discovery of the Royal Cemetery at Ur as the powerful closing image:

Once when they found me, some refrain '*Quoi faire?*'

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis, *Allegory*, p.36. Denomy, *Heresy*, pp. 22-26.

Striking my hands, they say repeatedly  
 I muttered; although I could hear and see  
 I knew no one.—I am silent in my chair,  
 And stronger and more cold is my despair  
 At last, for I have come into a country  
 Whose vivid Queen upon no melody  
 Admits me. *Manchmal glaub ich, ich kann nicht mehr.*

Song follows song, the chatterer to the fire  
 Would follow soon . . . Deep in Ur's royal pits  
 Sit still the courtly bodies, a little bowl  
 By each, attired to voluntary blitz . . .  
 In Shub-ad's grave the fingers of a girl  
 Were touching still, when they found her, the strings of her lyre.

The opening allusion is extremely localised; the poet uses not only the image of epilepsy, but one of his own fits of 'petit mal', his diagnosed form of the illness, which became especially acute during his time in Detroit in 1939/40.<sup>7</sup> The 'post-epileptic confusion', characterised by physical hyper-tension and mental absence, is contrasted with the physical indolence and painfully acute mental focus of his current 'despair', in which he is the spurned lover, barred access to his mistress's kingdom, but unable to overcome his obsession. Not even an appeal to her sympathy will admit him, as he protests with the opening line from Rilke's 'The Idiot's Song': '*Manchmal glaub ich, ich kann nicht mehr* [Sometimes I believe, I can take no more]'. What might be considered a rather trite association—his mistress being the queen whom he serenades for admittance into her life—becomes more poignant, interesting and even disturbing in the sestet, as this queen is compared with Queen Shub-ad of Ur.

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<sup>7</sup> A similar incident, if not the incident in question, is recounted in Haffenden's biography: 'Berryman paced about or sat in a chair, but seemed unable to communicate anything. Dr Shafarman made a tentative diagnosis of 'post-epileptic confusion', and recommended a psychiatrist [...]. The psychiatrist notified [Bhain] Campbell that Berryman was suffering from some form of psycho-neurotic maladjustment, and feared the onset of schizophrenia. Berryman appeared to be in a serious stage of total retreat from the real world into an inner obsessive or disintegrating mental life.' Haffenden, *Life of John Berryman*, pp.117-23 (p.120).

The archaeologist Leonard Woolley excavated the tombs of the Sumerian king Abar-gi and his queen Shub-ad in 1927. Berryman draws from Woolley's detailed account of his findings in which he explains important evidence concerning Sumerian social and burial customs. Woolley discovered the remains of around ninety members of the royal court buried in the tombs, along with the Queen herself, and many important artefacts. Important to the sonnet's meaning is what Woolley concluded to be the Sumerian tradition of human sacrifice, in honour of the King and Queen, who were regarded as deities. He notes that, 'clearly, when a royal person died, he or she was accompanied to the grave by all the members of the court'. The evidence also suggests that the courtiers went down willingly to the pit without a struggle; 'attired' in fine garments, they took their places and were drugged—most likely with the content of the 'little bowl / By each'—to induce either death or sleep. After someone had entered to make the final preparations, placing a harp on each of their bodies, the grave was filled in with earth.<sup>8</sup>

Since royal persons were seen as gods, their lives were not considered to be ending, but rather continuing in a different form; hence, members of the court considered it a privilege to accompany their masters in order to continue in their service.<sup>9</sup> The allusion to Shub-ad's tomb actually provides the sonnet with a relatively optimistic close. The poet relates his situation, rooted desolately as he is to his chair, to that of the self-sacrificing courtiers, who sat peacefully in position to await their deaths. The poet, who is despairingly unable to contemplate life without Chris, would hence willingly follow her into death in order to be reborn into her service. The final image conveys the wish-fulfilment that his devotion has not been in vain. The image is of one of Shub-ad's courtiers, found in the process of playing a melody; the courtier has been 'admitted' into

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<sup>8</sup> Leonard Woolley, 'Ur of the Chaldees', *Eyewitness to Discovery*, ed. by Brian M. Fagan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp.132-40.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p.140.

her kingdom through her death. Hence, the poet implies that following her into death will be the only way he will be admitted on any melody, but, at least he will have finally been admitted.

This type of association functions on the same level as the classical mythological imagery; it is employed as the poetic vocabulary of passionate love with all its emotional predicaments. The extensive use of such pagan allusions makes Christian imagery, when it does occur, appear to be employed for a special purpose. Whereas the lexicon of love is expressed in terms of classical mythology and other non-Christian imagery, that which is Judeo-Christian in nature generally represents the language of guilt. Because of this contrast the almost parodically ostentatious use of such classical imagery appears to represent an ironic legitimisation of the affair. The poet takes refuge in the world of literary tradition and mythology; by associating his situation with that of famous lovers and adulterers of the past, he elevates the affair to the status of literary epic. This elevation, however, is also portrayed as a futile gesture, since reality impinges in the form of guilt over the hurt caused to other parties and the possibility of divine retribution against him.

He identifies both Chris and himself with a wide variety of mythological characters and deities. In Sonnet 31, the poet compares his situation with Chris to that of Penelope, the loyal wife of Odysseus, who put off her suitors by claiming she would not marry until she had finished making her father's shroud, the work on which she would secretly unravel again at the end of each day:<sup>10</sup>

Troubling are masks . . . the faces of friends, my face

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<sup>10</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by E. V. Rieu (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1991) p.290 (19.139-56).

Met unaware, and your face: where I mum  
 Your doubleganger writhes, wraiths are we come  
 To keep a festival, none but wraiths embrace;  
 Our loyal rite only we interlace,  
 Laertes' winding-sheet done and undone  
 In Ithaca by day and night . . . we thrum  
 Hopeful our shuffles, trusting to our disgrace.

The purpose of the allusion is twofold: firstly, it conveys the fact that their relationship is one based on deception to the outside world, for which the poet uses the metaphor of 'wraiths', or doubles, of themselves; their 'real' selves are the image of themselves which they convey to the outside world, whereby they are unattached, but in the capacity of their affair they meet as 'wraiths'. They deceive the outside world as Penelope deceived her suitors. The allusion also functions as the poet's remark on Chris's reluctance to marry him; she deceives him into thinking the affair has a future and marriage is a possibility, even though she secretly intends to remain with her husband. The same section of *The Odyssey* is evoked in Sonnet 91, where he compares himself to the victim of Odysseus, 'who shrank down / And wiped his sharp eyes with a helpless look, / The great tears falling'. This is an allusion to the beggar Irus, whom Odysseus, himself disguised as a beggar, fells with a single blow.<sup>11</sup> The idea is that he may well be very surprised to discover what Chris is really like, in the same way that the boy she rode with would one day become a 'larcener'. Also, the poet fears that he is merely one of the pretenders to his mistress' heart and that her real Odysseus would be one in the shape of such as the now-'larcener', who shares her wild, rather than his neurotic, nature.

The Homeric allusion to Aeolus, in the poignant sestet of Sonnet 72, portrays the poet's ambiguous feelings towards the memory of Chris now that their relationship has ended.

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<sup>11</sup> *Odyssey*, xviii.1-141.

Aeolus is the guardian of the winds who lived on the Island of Aeolia and assisted Odysseus on his voyage home to Ithaca.<sup>12</sup> After relating how reminiscing with an old friend led him to forget her ‘for the first / Hour in months of watches’, he reflects on his wistful emptiness now that the wind of her memory no longer blows his way; irrepressible sorrow is aroused by the thought that her memory may be forever lost. Fortunately, through this act of reflection his memory ‘swung you [Chris] back like a lock’, and he ends with a singing plea to Aeolus to aid him back home; back where her memory is secure, or even where he is physically back with her.

A similar anxiety is expressed in Sonnet 96 where he relates himself to Oedipus on his discovering the terrible truth about his mother and father. The terrible truth that the poet has to confront is that the affair is over, and worse, that he may never see or hear from Chris again. The comparison with Oedipus is prompted by his remark that he is ‘sad as a blind child, not to see / Ever you’. Oedipus gouged out his own eyes which had been blind to the truth; the poet is blind as a result of his truth, since his only desire is to see *her* again, and he knows this is now an impossibility. Moreover, there is the impression that he feels his blindness is to some degree, like Oedipus’, a self-inflicted wound. He has somehow brought this pain on himself by embroiling himself in the affair. Such examples demonstrate the poet falling back on the universal language of the classics—drawing from what Philip Larkin derogatorily termed the ‘myth kitty’—to provide a form of poetic shorthand. In the case of the last two examples, classical mythology is used for analogies of lost love, to depict the anxious involuntariness of memory and the fear of losing sight of the last vestiges of this love.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, x. 1-80.

Elsewhere, Berryman demonstrates subtle corruptions of Romantic convention. In Sonnet 77 he draws from Keats's version of the Glaucus and Scylla legend in 'Endymion'. As he watches his mistress asleep he compares himself to 'Endymion's Glaucus [who] through a thousand years / Collected the bodies of lovers lost, until / His own beloved's body rustled and sighed'. When young Endymion meets Glaucus, the old man relates the story of how Circe—jealous of Scylla whom she was spurned in favour of—kills the nymph and condemns Glaucus to spend a thousand years in the body of an old man, before he can eventually be allowed to die. Witnessing a shipwreck, Glaucus is mysteriously presented with a scroll instructing him as to the way to save himself. One task he must complete is to collect 'the bodies of lovers lost' and place them side by side, whereupon a heavenly favoured youth is promised to appear who can revive them. Endymion is that youth, and on meeting him, Glaucus enlists his help in consummating the task, first bringing Scylla back to life, and then the bodies of the other lovers, using the scroll's charm.<sup>13</sup>

The poet corrupts the conventions of Romanticism by regrounding the story in reality, featuring a bathetic return to what in the concluding half of the sestet is portrayed as the sordid furtiveness of the affair. His mistress, awaking from her slumber, would awake to the anxieties of marital infidelity, such as being found out and noticed by others in the house. His response is to smother her again with passion 'blotting her fears', as once she did to him, so that she is once again oblivious to the uncomfortable truth of their predicament. The fact that he is watching her in 'the vague room's morning-after botch' grounds the romantic classical allegory within a distinctly unromantic context, offering a form of very beautiful, but ultimately ironic, escapism.

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<sup>13</sup> John Keats, 'Endymion', *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Miriam Allott (New York: Longman, 1986), pp.214-240 (III.190-923).

David K. Weiser has explored in *Berryman's Sonnets* 'the process of creative imitation, in which old forms are deliberately reshaped to express new attitudes'.<sup>14</sup> Weiser argues that the sonnets adopt the notion of the '*inventio*' that is prevalent in Renaissance poetry. The sixteenth-century concept of 'imitation' allows the poet to assimilate, but deviate from, the models of his literary predecessors, in the way that Shakespeare and Sidney stylistically adapted Wyatt and Petrarch. In Weiser's view, Berryman 'assimilated old poetic forms but not their content. For all his technical prowess, the modern poet could not sustain belief in such postulates as right reason and natural law. A radical discrepancy thus separates his sonnets from their tradition.'<sup>15</sup> Weiser's analysis is certainly a useful contribution, and in a large number of sonnets it is true that the poet mocks tradition, contemporising it, as in Sonnet 23, through the conflict between form and content.

However, a fundamental misconception of Weiser's illustrates the importance of not assuming that Berryman's 'contemporary' idiom necessarily represents a secular worldview, or rather, one characterised by uninhibited moral relativism, despite the often lubricious portrayal of the affair. Weiser remarks that

an illicit love affair brought out his awareness of an underlying conflict between inner impulses and outer norms. For Renaissance poets that clash had been internal, between a man's own powers of reason and passion. For Berryman, as with other American writers, it was another version of the conflict between the individual and society. He could not be reconciled to the seemingly arbitrary bonds that hindered his pleasure.<sup>16</sup>

Despite adopting contemporary idioms, Berryman is far closer to the Renaissance poets than Weiser acknowledges, certainly in terms of representing an internal conflict. The conflict is not just between 'reason and passion', but also between (involuntary) faith

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<sup>14</sup> David K. Weiser, 'Berryman's Sonnets: In and Out of the Tradition', *American Literature*, 55 (1983), 388-404 (p.388).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p.389.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p.404.

and concupiscence. Weiser does identify the prevalence of guilt in the sequence,<sup>17</sup> but the principle of the *inventio* should extend to the actual content, to the extent that the inner conflict of guilt infests both itself and the poetic forms and conventions harnessing it. This applies to the literary allusions that Berryman assimilates and often subverts; they are corrupted by the representation of his own ‘moral corruption’, as well as by the intrusive notions of moral and intellectual virtue. The conflict is therefore not just between form and content, but it is within the content itself.

Whereas the tension between the private world of the affair and the threat of wider social and familial consequences is undoubtedly a major theme, the main source of conflict is very much an internal one. The inner conflict is often latent in the imagery, as well as at times becoming a more foregrounded theme. Furthermore, Berryman also assimilates and subverts earlier traditions of content, rather than just form; especially the principles of courtly love with all its associations. However, there is an important difference between Berryman and the troubadours, which results in the conflict within the content. As Denomy remarks, the troubadours, who ‘formed, developed and spread [courtly love] in a milieu that was fundamentally Christian’, displayed no overt conscience of the conflict between their conception of love and that of Christian morality. If they were concerned in any way by either the notion of sin, or the Christian meaning of human love and sexuality, ‘they simply did not advert to it, or, if they did, they ignored it.’ Courtly love had its own conception of morality, unconcerned with the Law of God; a relationship would be judged by this principle: ‘Does love further a man in virtue or does it affect a regress; does it ennoble him or degrade him?’<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.393.

<sup>18</sup> Denomy, *Heresy of Courtly Love*, pp.27-28.

An illustration of the inherent ethical strife of Berryman's sequence is to be found in his depiction of lovemaking in Sonnet 4. In this case, the poet is concerned with both moralities: the ennobling effects of love and the Law of God. The rivalry between the two is apparent both in the ambiguity of the imagery—the classical metaphors also suggesting a more Christian eschatology—and commitment to the scenario provoked by it:

Ah when you drift hover before you kiss  
 More my mouth yours now, lips grow more to mine  
 Teeth click, suddenly your tongue like a mulled wine  
 Slides fire,—I wonder what the point of life is.  
 Do, down this night where I adore you, Chris,  
 So I forsake the blest assistant shine  
 Of deep-laid maps I made for summits, swine-  
 enchanted lover, loafing in the abyss?

Loaf hardly, while my nerves dance, while the gale  
 Moans like your hair down here. But I lie still,  
 Strengthless and smiling under a maenad rule.  
 Whose limbs worked once, whose imagination's grail  
 Many or some would nourish, must now I fill  
 My strength with desire, my cup with your tongue,  
     no more Melpomene's, but Erato's fool? . .

The sensual train of submission is half-interrupted in the middle of the octet by his halting reflection on life's purpose. The cosmogonical imagery of the following lines can be viewed simply as a metaphor to represent the abandonment of an entirely secular notion of honour; but even so, its very explicit spiritual connotations also convey anxiety with regard to his eternal fate. The juxtaposition of the blest 'summits' with the 'abyss' heightens the drama concerning the moral choices he makes over the affair. In this sense, such imagery can be seen as part of the exaggerated language of erotic love: a heightened self-sacrificial love in which he lays down not only his earthly life, but also his eternal soul, which he abandons to the 'abyss'. The irresistible desire to which

he abandons himself is consequently made the more potent and dangerous by the suggestion of an eternal choice.

The poet poses a question in the second half of the octet: is he abandoning the more challenging and arduous—though guided and ultimately more rewarding—‘blest’ path of virtue, for the baser, slothful path of concupiscent submission? The octet invites a response to this self-definition of the ‘swine-enchanted lover’: is he like a victim of the maenad Circe, lured sensually to the point where he is irretrievably enslaved in the form of his own bestial nature? Or is he like the man in Augustine’s analogy of waking, which illustrates the way concupiscence sloths the conscience? The saint tells of the man attempting to rise from his slumber in the morning, who knows it is in his best interests to rise, yet he continually gives way to the luxury of inertia, instead of forcing himself by willpower to pursue his better judgement and get up.<sup>19</sup> The volta is in the form of a witty riposte to this appeal of conscience. He avoids challenging the notion that his state is the baser, but instead picks up on the assertion that he is ‘loafing’ in it, given the sensuous electricity of his experience. He offers an alternative spirituality in the sestet, one that glorifies the submission to a ‘maenad’s rule’, rather than struggles to overcome it. It is a form of religious adherence that contrasts sharply with the eschatological implications of the octet.

What remains is the concession that the all-consuming passion is somehow a reductive form of human experience. This, however, is expressed more in terms of artistic rather than spiritual development; through reference to the muses, he questions whether he has become ‘no more Melpomene’s, but Erato’s fool?’ What he regrets more than the physical inertia is the reductive inertia of the imagination, which has been consumed

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<sup>19</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p.165 (Bk VIII, ch.5).

entirely by Chris. The final assertion doesn't necessarily follow on from the tenet of his argument, as he is merely exchanging one muse for another: the muse of tragedy for the muse of love poetry, rather than rejecting his artistic inspiration altogether. The main point is that his imagination is now hostage to a total preoccupation with one person, rather than many, or even himself. The affair is consequently also shown to be 'immoral' on the grounds of courtly love morality, since it is reductive rather than 'ennobling'. But the speaker clearly judges himself on Christian grounds as well, although he opts heroically to battle this notion of transgression. However, it is a form of ironic heroism that he adopts at the volta, characterised by wit and bravado in the face of a predicament which he feels powerless to resolve by making the moral choice.

### **The Triad of Conflict: Sonnets 33, 34 & 35**

Whereas the poet's mythological allegories of love do suggest inherent tensions, the inner struggle of his conscience is portrayed more explicitly in other sonnets. He reacts to the threat of moral censure, inherent in the law of God, with a profane counter-religion that takes on a variety of forms. Sonnets 33, 34 and 35 are closely related to each other in the sequence; it is an example of Berryman's use of the 'triad', or grouping thematically linked poems into three, which became a characteristic feature of the structuring of *The Dream Songs*.<sup>20</sup> The seemingly-involuntary nature of falling in love is portrayed, far from uniquely, as the act of being bewitched by his mistress. In Sonnet 4, he compared himself to a victim of Circe, lured by her charms into supping the swine-converting potion. He develops this idea in Sonnet 33, where he becomes embroiled in his mistress's witchcraft. He wills to follow the cult of Chris, but only

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<sup>20</sup> Haffenden makes this observation about the Dream Songs in *Critical Commentary*, pp.96-97.

because he is under the spell of love. The sonnet concerns his anxieties over the deceptive nature of the affair, the irresistible lure of which has made them ‘sneaks’. The speaker suspects that his wife suspects, but is confident that his mistress’s husband does not:

One only, ignorant and kind,  
Saves his own life useful and usual,  
Blind to the witch-antinomy I sup  
Spinning between the laws on the black edge, blind  
Head—O do I?—I dance to disannul.

The sonnet portrays the speaker’s exhilarating sense of social danger and sin, something which both excites and disturbs. He is torn between the law of love and the moral law of Judaeo-Christian morality in the dangerous position he calls the ‘black edge’. The final image is that of an occult ritual, his desire to be delivered from his predicament represented by the enactment of a curse. His attempt to ‘disannul’ has a number of implications: he would like to bring about the annulment of Chris’s marriage as well as his own; he also desires to ‘annul’ the moral dilemma afflicting his conscience, as well as the anxiety aroused by the deception of the affair and guilt over his wife. There is also an allusion here to faith in Christ, as depicted in Saint Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Paul uses the analogy of a man’s will, which cannot be annulled once it has been ratified, to demonstrate the binding nature of God’s promise to Abraham. As the father of faith, those who follow Abraham’s example become his sons and heirs; they are justified by faith alone, as Abraham was, without the need to live according to the Law which came after it.<sup>21</sup> The poet, however, subverts Paul’s argument by implying that his law, the law of illicit love, can annul this covenant of faith.

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<sup>21</sup> Galatians 3.6-18.

Throughout the sonnets ‘our law’ is a concept he frequently recalls with a great sense of possessiveness. In Sonnet 54, for instance, he rides alone through the empty towns ‘meeting mainly the azure minions of our law’, the carefree birds or clouds against the blue sky, who are not subject to God’s Law of morality.<sup>22</sup> The poet can only appeal to make this ‘law’ binding. In Sonnet 55, he beckons action as an antidote to ‘departures of our law’, urging ‘let’s Dido-like “forge causes of abode”’, and create ways of keeping them together.<sup>23</sup> Sonnet 34 elaborates on the implications of this law, protesting the manner in which they are actually ‘bound’:

‘I *couldn’t leave you*’ you confessed next day.  
 Our law too binds. Grossly however bound  
 And jacketed apart, ensample-wound,  
 We come so little and can so little stay  
 Together, what can we know? Anything may  
 Amaze me: this did. Ah, to work underground  
 Slowly and wholly in your vein profound . .  
 Or like some outcast ancient Jew to say:

‘There *is* Judaea: in it Jerusalem:  
 In that the Temple: in the Temple’s inmost  
 Holy of holies hides the invisible Ark—  
 There nothing—there all—vast wing beating dark—  
 Voiceless, the terrible I AM—the lost  
 Tables of stone with the Law graved on them!’

The sonnet employs a curious mix of scriptural allusion and bookbinding imagery to make its point. His opening response to Chris’s confession sounds like a riposte to the accusation that the Law of God he transgresses is the only one grounded in the gravity

<sup>22</sup> Linebarger suggests that this is a reference to the police (*JB*, p.66); however, in the context of the rest of the sequence, and the consistent ‘law’ motif, it more appropriately signifies their identification with nature, or other lovers; cf. Sonnet 71.

<sup>23</sup> Dido, the first Queen of Carthage, created the boundary of her city after Iarbus, king of Libya, sold her a piece of land ‘as large as can be contained within a bull’s hide’. Cunningly, she had the hide cut into very thin strips and, when tied together, they formed a circle big enough to build a city in. She falls in love in with the visiting Aeneas after being struck by Cupid’s bow, and their love is consummated in a cave, which they shelter in after Juno and Venus conspire a storm to bring them together. Obedient to his divine mission, however, Aeneas must leave her and travel on. Mortified at her separation from Aeneas, Dido, with the unwitting help of her sister Anna, builds a sacrificial pyre, which she subsequently throws herself onto. Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1.335-756, 4.1-705, 6.450-76; Ovid, *Heroides*, 7.

of authority and permanence. He attempts to elevate the law of love also to the same permanent status. What is gross about the ligature of their own law, however, is that their union is paradoxically one that separates them as well, since they are both also bound to their spouses by God's 'Law'. Like the two covers of a book, bound by the spine, but separated by the matter of the text itself, they are joined by their love, but separated by the marital situations which prevent their coming together.

The poet considers the affair 'gross', not only in relation to the difficult and inconvenient circumstances it demands, but also because it contravenes the purity of 'the Law'. This becomes the focus of the sestet. He conveys the gravity of their transgression, in respect to God's Law, through his use of the word 'ensample'; an archaic word (meaning 'example') whose modern use 'is almost wholly due to reminiscences of the passages in which the word occurs in the New Testament [King James version]' (*OED*). The biblical connotation is of a 'deterrent instance of punishment, or of the evil consequences of any conduct; a practical warning' (*OED*). It is used in this manner in both 1 Corinthians and 2 Peter in relation to God's punishment towards those who flouted His Law to pursue that which was forbidden.<sup>24</sup> The painful, unworkable circumstances of the affair are consequently portrayed as a punishment and warning to other transgressors. Their predicament has become an ensample in the eyes of the Law, though not one that they are altogether ashamed of.

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<sup>24</sup> In relation to the Israelites in Moses' day, whom God destroyed in the wilderness for various transgressions, Paul writes: 'Now all these things happened unto them for *ensamples*: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the earth are come' (1 Cor 10.11). Similarly, Peter writes: 'And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrha into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an *ensample* unto those that after should live ungodly; And delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds)' (2 Pet 2.6-8).

He is pleasantly ‘amazed’ at her confession, since the infrequency of their trysts has ensured they are still somewhat of a mystery to each other; although God’s Law has barred them, their own law has still succeeded in forging an emotional attachment. There are several ways one can interpret the two possibilities he subsequently sets before himself at the end of the octet. The first way is to see the choice in the context of the preceding and subsequent sonnets in the triad, as relating to the conflict between ‘our law’ and ‘the Law’. In this case he presents himself with two alternatives: one is to submit completely to the arbitrary law of love, to devote himself entirely to the furtive ‘underground’ work of the adulterous affair. He would like to do this in the ‘vein’ or character of his mistress, who is able to undertake the affair with a sense of unconcerned abandon that he doesn’t quite possess. The second alternative is to acknowledge his ‘outcast’ status, the fact that he has placed himself outside the—in his case, heavenly—Jerusalem of God’s kingdom through his transgressions, and to recover the required sense of reverence and awe towards His commandments.

The sestet concentrates entirely on the outcast’s contemplation of the holy of holies. Strongly echoing Yeats’s ‘Leda and the Swan’, the descriptive contemplation evokes the darkly looming, violent and overpowering presence of the Law on his conscience, an impediment to any satisfaction his underground work might bring. The effect is one of an uncanny and disturbing mystery which the fear of God and His commandments arouses; one that he struggles to comprehend. In view of the subsequent sonnet of the triad, Job 28 undoubtedly inspires the use of the mining metaphor as a contrast with the fearful image of the holy of holies. In this chapter, Job remarks on the way in which man knows where various precious things such as gold and silver are, and goes after them; however, only God knows where wisdom is, and He has declared to man: ‘the

fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; / and to depart from evil is understanding.’<sup>25</sup> The choice the speaker lays out is one between a rash, earthly attachment and the wise, eternal one.

There is, however, a characteristic ambiguity to the sonnet which admits another possible interpretation of the two choices; that is that the Law of God portrayed in the sestet can be seen as a metaphor for the law of love. In this case, the choice he presents himself with at the end of the octet is either to continue his secret work, in the form of carrying on with the affair; or to remain outside the law of love, but still admiring its source, Chris, with awe from afar, seeing it as too profound and precious to desecrate through any actual stealthy encounters. Even on the level of metaphor, however, the Old Testament imagery still, by association, brings an uncomfortable sense of moral transgression and spiritual guilt to the speaker’s predicament.

As if in response to this uncanny fear of the Law, the subsequent sonnet features the poet musing over whether there is any basis for his paranoia:

Nothing there? nothing up the sky alive,  
Invisibly considering? . . . I wonder.  
Sometimes I heard Him in traditional thunder;  
Sometimes in sweet rain, or in a great ’plane, I’ve  
Concluded that I heard Him not. You thrive  
So, where I pine. See no *adjustment* blunder?  
Job was alone with Satan? Job? O under  
Hell-ladled morning, some of my hopes revive:

. . . Less nakedly malign—loblolly—dull  
Eyes on our end . . . a table crumples, things  
Jump and fuse, a fat voice calls down the sky,  
‘Too excitable! too sensitive! thin-skull,  
I am for you: I shrive your wanderings:  
Stand closer, evil, till I pluck your sigh.’

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<sup>25</sup> Job 28.28.

It begins with a rhetorical question, followed by its very anthropomorphic-sounding elaboration, emitted as if in response to a negative proposition concerning God's existence. The God he considers is one who reveals himself in nature and the technological endeavours of man; His habitation of the sky evokes an ancient cosmology that sets the scene for His very clumsy physical entrance in the sestet. These ruminations over whether or not he discerned the presence of God in creation anticipate the comparison with Job, for they are reminiscent of God's rhetorical questioning of Job, when He demands to know whether or not Job is responsible for, and understanding of, the workings of creation: 'Who has cleft a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, / to bring rain on a land where no man is'.<sup>26</sup> In this way God implicitly affirms His exclusive role in the creation and maintenance of the universe. However, after recalling earlier sensations of His true presence, in both wrathful and gentle moods, the speaker affirms his newfound faithlessness. Chris, the rhetorical addressee of the sonnet, has now displaced God as the centre of his devotion; his heart yearns only for her presence and not God's; this is the '*adjustment* blunder' he now considers.

This newly perceived total absence of God also brings with it a sense of helplessness, which brings to his mind the Book of Job, and unexpectedly rekindles the prospect of faith. As God allowed Satan free rein on Job, so may God have allowed Chris, or Satan through Chris, free rein to do her emotional worst on the poet. There are also further parallels with Job that would revive his hopes. Important to the story of Job is the fact that he really is a blameless and upright man; he is innocent of any real transgressions against God, and his afflictions, despite the false counsel of his 'comforters', are not the

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<sup>26</sup> Job 38-42 (38.25-26).

consequence of his guilt. The reassurance that the speaker subsequently takes from this therefore is the notion that just because he suffers does not mean he is necessarily guilty of any sin. On the contrary, the suffering could be a sign of God's confidence in him. A final point about Job is that he continually appeals for a personal meeting with God in order to protest his innocence. God, however, although he eventually appears, does not actually vindicate him. What is important to Job is not that He admits he is right, but that God does actually appear to him; furthermore He vouchsafes him a glimpse of His eternal mysteries through the order of creation and the divine plan, a revelation of his divine majesty which leaves Job in awe and repenting of his doubt over God's goodness.

Reassured by Job's revelation, the speaker's image of God that is portrayed in the sestet consequently mellows; He appears 'less nakedly malign' to him. In a depiction highly reminiscent of God's deprecatory treatment by Henry in *The Dream Songs*,<sup>27</sup> God is described as 'loblolly—dull eyes on our end', the image being of a rather artless and clumsy God.<sup>28</sup> Whereas 'the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind',<sup>29</sup> here the 'loblolly' God announces his presence by way of a stomping earthquake. His voice, rather than thundering and magisterial as it is for Job, is described here as 'fat' and one that has to 'call' down to him, but it is just as accusative. As in Job, God does not vindicate the poet's freedom from guilt, but makes him feel his presence, accepting the poet as he is: one who mercifully 'shrive[s]' his 'wanderings'.

The nature of God's revelation to him is very different from that received by Job. God vouchsafes Job an insight into the divine order of the universe and Job is left in no

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<sup>27</sup> eg. cf. Songs 153, 238.

<sup>28</sup> I take 'loblolly' in the sense of the word meaning 'a bumpkin, rustic, boor' (*OED*).

<sup>29</sup> Job 38-42.

doubt about His nature. In the sonnet, however, God presents himself above all as a symptom of the poet's paranoia, insecurity and excitable temperament: 'Too excitable! too sensitive! thin-skull, / I am for you'. God is *for him*, one implication of this being *created* by his own neurotic proclivities. The speaker is comforted by this notion of God and draws closer in faith so as to be relieved of the guilt of his 'evil', its 'sigh' being 'pluck[ed]'. The sonnet, in its ironic use of Job, demonstrates Berryman's emerging tendency to both assimilate and subvert scripture to portray his own ambivalent attitude towards Christianity and faith, a tendency that would become more informed by secondary critical sources during the Dream Song period.

#### **'Fraud of the Law' and Literary Allusion.**

The words of Job are also alluded to in Sonnet 45—this time in the context of a quotation from John Donne—which also conveys a Job-style protestation of injustice:<sup>30</sup>

Boy twenty-one, in Donne, shied like a blow,—  
 His prose, from poems' seductive dynamite,—  
 I read 'The adulterer waits for the twilight . .  
 The twilight comes, and serves his turn.' (Not so:  
 Midnight or dawn.) I stuttered frightened 'No,  
 Nónone could decline, crookt, ghastly, from the sight  
 Of elected love and love's delicious rite  
 Upon the livid stranger Loves forego.'

. . I am this strange thing I despised; you are.

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<sup>30</sup> In 'A Sermon Preached to the King's Majestie at Whitehall 24 Feb 1625', Donne homilizes on the subject of original sin. He argues that Adam sold mankind into the propensity to sin through his fall, 'but in the *second sale*, [...] wee are sold to *actuell*, and *habituell* sins, by *our selves*, *cheaper*'. He offers the following chastening words to the licentious: 'The *Adulterer waits for the twy-light*, sayes *Job* [Job 24.15]. The *Twy-light* comes, and serves his turne; and *sin*, to night looks like a *Purchase*, like a *Treasure*; but aske this *Sinner* to *morrow*, and he hath sold *himselfe* for *nothing* [...]. *You have treasured up the wrath of God, against the day of wrath*: And this is a fearefull *privation*, of the *grace* of God here, and of the *Face* of God hereafter; a *privation* so much worse than *nothing*, as that they upon whom it falls, would faine be *nothing*, and cannot.' John Donne, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. by John Hayward (Bloomsbury: Nonesuch Press, 1929), pp.555-58.

To become ourselves we are these wayward things.  
 And the lies at noon, month's tremblings, who foresaw?  
 And I did not foresee fraud of the Law  
 The scarecrow restraining like a man, its rings  
 Blank . . . my love's eyes familiar as a scar!

The sonnet depicts the dramatic (even melodramatic) feeling of self-revulsion at having become the very thing that once appalled him, as well as the inevitable power of love which he feels lessens his culpability, though disturbingly still invites it.

The adulterer waits for the light to fade before pursuing his sin, but the darkness overtakes him. His youthful distaste is punctuated by the knowing and slightly flippant interjection of the older, adulterous poet: '(Not so: / Midnight or dawn)'. The young poet fearfully stutters his response, expressing the fear of being left exposed to such a sinful transformation should his religious faith desert him. None could decline passionate love and its temptations—the 'delicious rite' of illicit lovemaking—once the moral censor of the higher 'Love'—the 'livid stranger Love' of God—has been lost.

In the sestet, the poet's sense-breaking enjambment contributes to another syntactically demanding statement. Not only did he not foresee his 'fraud of the Law', becoming a thing he once regarded as evil; nor did he 'foresee fraud of the Law / The Scarecrow restraining like a man'. In other words, he never envisaged that the one thing he believed would scare him away from contravening God's Law and committing adultery—that is to say, his conscience, particularly after it was instilled with the fear of God on reading Donne—would restrain 'like a man', or display the same human frailty which he previously thought he was incapable of. The conscience which should have averted him was blunted; with 'its rings / Blank', the eyes of his 'scarecrow' conscience were not piercing or watchful, but impassive. The image prompts the closing, very unsettling evocation of his mistress's eyes, undermining what is portrayed elsewhere as

the enticing glamour of the affair; it is now also dulled by familiarity, though like a scar it is unsightly and recalls a deeper, painful wounding. The image represents the speaker's impression of the affair as it now stands; the novelty and excitement has waned, and a resurgent sense of its sinful nature, instilled above all by his youthful reading of Donne, has meant its continuation is also disturbing.

As well as an expression of a troubled conscience and crippling fear of God's punishment, the sonnet also represents a protest against what the speaker feels is the injustice of this affliction. Unlike Job, he realises that he has contravened the Law, but whilst he is not innocent, he offers several lines of defence to lessen his culpability: firstly, there is the apparently involuntary nature of his falling in love and the powerful force of human sexuality; secondly, there is the fact that his conscience did not offer a sufficient deterrent; it was a useless scarecrow, supposed to be frightening but utterly ineffectual in warding off his own attempt to defraud the Law. The sonnet amounts to a protestation of his fallen nature, and a striking example of his depiction of the struggle with his inner self; he feels the imprint of his Creator within his conscience, a constantly looming presence that manifests itself as the Law.

Sonnet 73 is an equally powerful portrayal of this inner conflict, with the poet drawing from Franz Kafka's short story 'In the Penal Colony'; he employs the image of the torture machine on which he becomes both torturer and victim:

Demand me again what Kafka's riddles mean,  
 For I am the penal colony's prime scribe:  
 From solitary, firing against the tribe

Uncanny judgements ancient and unclean.  
 I am the officer flat on my own machine,  
 Priest of the one Law no despair can bribe,  
 On whom the mort-prongs hover to inscribe  
 'I FELL IN LOVE' .. O none of this foreseen,  
 Adulteries and divorces cold I judged  
 And strapped the tramps flat. Now the harrow trembles  
 Down, a strap snaps, I wave—out of control—  
 To you to change the legend has not budged  
 These years: make the machine grave on me (stumbles  
 Someone to latch the strap) 'I MET MY SOUL.'

In Kafka's story, the old commandant of the penal colony has devised a combined torture and execution machine, the main feature of which is 'the Harrow'; this is a needle-fitted instrument which protractedly inscribes the crime of the condemned man on his body. The machine is operated by the officer, who is the sole adherent of this execution method left on the settlement. When he realises that the new commandant will abolish it, he himself chooses to be its last victim in place of the condemned man. The poet interprets 'Kafka's riddle' as a religious allegory, and the torture scenario aptly represents the tension between his fear of, and respect for, the Law; as well as his seemingly irrepressible will to transgress it in the case of his adultery, driven as he is by 'love'.

Significantly, he becomes the 'Priest of the one Law no despair can bribe', a line conveying the frictional counter-pressures of his conscience. A brief point about the traditional role of the priest—the most important cultic figure in Israel—in relation to the Law is important in appreciating the full implications of the Old Testament imagery. The Law or *tôrâ* was regarded above all as a sacred expression of divine will; the Priest's role was originally an oracular one, pronouncing God's will on matters using the dice-like Urim and Thummim, which gave simple 'Yes/No' responses. This developed into a more complex system of divine requirements on cultic and ethical

matters until the *tôrâ* came to mean all the divine law recorded in the Pentateuch, which the priests were responsible for upholding; they were also responsible for all casuistry and jurisprudence resulting from it.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the priesthood, throughout most of the history of Israel, was a hereditary office, being reserved exclusively for those of the tribe of Levi.

The speaker is one, like the Levites, born into his obligation to uphold the Law; in other words, he did not choose to develop this awareness of sin which now has him, figuratively speaking, under the Harrow. In this priestly role he understands the divine sanction of death that must be imposed in the case of adultery, and his own machine is dutifully carrying out the slowly-executed sentence. His defence against himself is that he ‘FELL IN LOVE’, a state that has brought him to ‘despair’. But as far as the Law is concerned, falling in love, with its all-consuming emotionalism, is no excuse and there will be no leniency due to it; the Law cannot be bribed. His conscience will allow him no clemency; he cannot change God’s Law, nor can he erase or manipulate his awareness of it. Falling in love consequently becomes the crime itself that is recorded in blood on his body. As he also remarks in Sonnet 45, the speaker’s own transgression was not ‘foreseen’ by him; he was once one who judged this particular sin coldly in others, unable to relate to the possible motivations behind it. Now he himself has fallen victim to love of another’s spouse, and yet his sense of the sin’s gravity has not altered, resulting in the torturous state of mind he is now forced to endure. It is a highly pertinent image of the dynamics of moral conscience; he is judge, torturer, defendant and victim, receiving instant judgement and punishment without trial; as the last inscribed words indicate, it is a harrowing confrontation with his own soul.

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<sup>31</sup> Alfred Cody, ‘Priests and the Divine Will’, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.607.

### ‘The Imaginary Jew’

There is at this stage no attempt to examine critically the source of the Law itself. This is the quest of Henry in *The Dream Songs* who takes an investigative attitude towards scripture, seeking possible ammunition for his rebellion against God and Christianity’s precepts of faith and morality. For now, the sense of transgression is too disturbing to probe its source, but the rebellion manifests itself in other ways. Amidst the range of imagery employed by Berryman to depict his relationship with Chris—classical, mythological, pagan, nautical, etc—the Old Testament imagery stands out as being employed specifically to portray or arouse the conflict of conscience which results from it. With the foreboding notion of ‘the Law’ the poet adopts the legalistic Old Testament stage of God’s revelation to represent this psychological obstacle. Compared to *The Dream Songs*, where the New Testament remains the predominant source of the scriptural allusions, here the religious imagery is overwhelmingly slanted towards the Hebrew Bible. As well as reflecting the fact that Berryman had not yet developed his active academic involvement in New Testament studies at this point, it also reflects the nature of the religious anxiety he wanted to convey. ‘The Law’, together with its associated imagery from the Old Testament of ritual and sacrifice, evokes the sensation of an abstract, detached and jealous God whom man must at all times seek to appease; One who is instantly wrathful towards transgressions of His covenant. It is an uncanny and disturbing representation of the divine.

The speaker of the sonnets becomes the ‘imaginary Jew’ living under and subject to the Law; Christian imagery, with a few notable exceptions, is avoided in favour of a

consistent Jewish theme. In Berryman's short story, 'The Imaginary Jew'—published in 1945, several years before writing the *Sonnets*—he explains how he developed a special fascination, sympathy and identification with the Jewish people. This was despite the fact that he only possessed a vague notion of what it actually meant to be Jewish, and this was a result of prejudice against certain Jews known to him, although he was ignorant of their ethnic identity:

I became the anomaly which only a partial society can produce, and for which it has no name known to the lexicons. In one area, but not exclusively, 'nigger-lover' is cast in a parallel way: but for a special sympathy and liking for Jews—which became my fate, so that I trembled when I heard one abused in talk—we have no term. [...] One further circumstance may be mentioned, as a product I believe of this curious training. I am spectacularly unable to identify Jews as Jews,—by name, cast of feature, accent, or environment, —and this has been true, not only of course before the college incident, but during my whole life since. [...] Now Jewishness may be a fact as striking and informative as someone's past heroism or his Christianity or his understanding of the subtlest human relations, and I feel sure that something operates to prevent my utilizing the plain signs by which such characters—in a Jewish man or woman—may be identified, and prevent my retaining the identification once it is made.<sup>32</sup>

The reason behind Berryman's religious identification with the Jews is not hard to discern in the light of his representations of a tortured conscience. The Jewish religious predicament is that one, as a Jew, has been especially blessed; a Jew is one of God's chosen people, picked out for special treatment, but because of this more harshly judged. The poet uses this identification to express the speaker's paranoia; he is inheritor of, and subject to, a covenant with God that he himself, like every individual Jew, did not personally make. It is the sense of persecution the speaker identifies with; he has not chosen the moral precepts which he finds himself actually judging himself by. Furthermore, it is precisely this inability to recognise a Jew— though he knows what one is and identifies with them—which forms the basis of the Jewish religious identification as a metaphor for the persecution at the hands of his conscience. He only

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<sup>32</sup> Berryman, 'The Imaginary Jew', in *Recovery*, p.246.

possesses a vague and fearful notion of where the source of the still inner voice that accuses him comes from.

Hence, he feels persecuted by God, or at least His imprint on his conscience, in the same way that he perceived the Jews as being unjustly discriminated against at a social level on racial grounds, because of an ethnic identification they never themselves chose. Furthermore, the Jewish identification becomes not just an ethnic but also a spiritual one. There is a definite crisis of religious identity in the short story, in which he is mistaken for a Jew and insulted by an Irishman in Union Square; this identity crisis becomes an important factor in the representation of the inner conflict in the sonnets. In a key passage of 'The Imaginary Jew', he is confronted with actually having to prove a faith which he doesn't consider himself to possess, in order to prove that he doesn't possess another:

"I'm *not* denying it! Or rather I am, but only because I'm not a Jew!" [...]

"Jesus, the Jew is excited," said the Irishman.

"I have a right to be excited, you son of a bitch. Suppose I call you a Jew. Yes, you're a Jew. Does that mean anything?"

"Not a damn thing." He spat over the rail past a man's head.

"Prove that you're not. I say you are."

"Now listen, you Jew. I'm a Catholic."

"So am I, or I was born one, I'm not one now. I was born a Catholic." [...]

"Yeah?" said the Irishman. "Say the Apostles' Creed."

Memory went swirling back, I could hear the little bell die as I hushed it and set it on the felt, Father Boniface looked at me tall from the top of the steps and smiled, greeting me in the darkness before dawn as I came to serve, the men pressed around me under the lamps, and I could remember nothing but *visibilium omnium . . . et invisibilium?*

"I don't remember it."

The Irishman laughed with his certainty.

In his poetry, the recollection of his altar serving days with Father Boniface always represents a nostalgic remembrance of his lost faith. It is not necessarily nostalgia for the faith itself, but for a time when he was not afflicted by the anxiety of religious

uncertainty and the inner conflict of wills.<sup>33</sup> When challenged by the Irishman, all he can recall by way of proof of his Catholic identity is half a line from the Nicene Creed (the wrong creed, since he was asked to recite the Apostles' Creed). He is made to confront identification with a faith to which up to that point he has remained comparatively indifferent. Yet he now finds he is harshly judging himself on the basis of Judaeo-Christian moral precepts which become a preoccupation, so much so that disturbing reminiscences of his youthful readings of Donne rise to the surface. It is a faith he was born with, but had rejected and not practised during adulthood. On the one hand, it is a feeling of misidentification on the part of his conscience, similar to that which occurred in Union Square, which leads him to associate spiritually with not just the social plight, but also the religious plight, of the Jewish people. However, on the other hand, like a Jew, he has been born into this identification of faith and ethnicity, of Catholicism, the moral precepts of which he now finds himself judging himself on the basis of, even though it is a faith he knows he has rejected. He is being persecuted for a state he was born into, not like the Jew by society, but by his own conscience, and consequently (he fears) by God.

The imagery of the Hebrew Bible tends to be employed specifically to reinforce his moral scruples over the affair, which makes it stand out from the other forms of imagery, such as those derived from classical or courtly love traditions, which tend to be more generally used. In Sonnet 21, for instance, he contemplates his feelings towards his mistress's husband, comparing himself to one of the most famous adulterers of the Bible: 'Whom undone David into the dire van sent / I'd see as far. I can't dislike that man'. King David fell in love with Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite, and, after she

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. 'Long (my dear) ago, when rosaries' in *Henry's Fate*, p.14, and '6th Address to the Lord' from *Love & Fame*.

became pregnant with his child, he had Uriah killed. He instructed his commander Joab to send the Hittite directly into the enemy vanguard during battle, where he knew he would be certain to perish. David subsequently married her and she bore a son; however, the act 'displeased the Lord', and this brought him great misfortune.<sup>34</sup> The scriptural allusion consequently lends a sense of foreboding to the sonnet. Although not directly jealous of 'that man', the guilt of such duplicity towards one so decent is consequently tainted by the fear of divine, as well as social, retribution.<sup>35</sup> The poet would associate himself again with the highly fallible David in 'King David Dances,' the poem which closes his final collection, *Delusions, etc.*

Sonnet 57 portrays his excitement, but mostly his discomfort, over the 'furtive' nature of the affair. The storm trope illustrates their head-lowered stealth, as they persevere with the affair through the turbulent circumstances in their lives; circumstances that he feels their relationship is exacerbating, and mostly hurting others rather than themselves. The poet anticipates the day when it will be safe for them to carry their love out openly into the outside world. The time has not yet come, and the scriptural allusion is to another transgressor who fell foul of God's wrath:

Our love conducted as in tropic rain  
 Develops hair and lowers its head: the lash  
 And weight of rain breed, like the soundless slosh

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<sup>34</sup> 2 Samuel 11. William Meredith very appropriately cites the first line of Sonnet 21 in a remark upon Berryman's poetic skill: 'Berryman's work breathes with the intellectuality of an alert and scholarly mind. His use of books is the opposite of what we mean by the term bookish. Often his allusions revive the violence of an imaginary event by some highly original violence of syntax. Identifying his rival (the Excellent lady's lawful husband) with King David's rival Uriah the Hittite (Bathsheba's lawful husband), the poet condenses into one flashing line the story (II Samuel 11) of how David sent Uriah into the vanward of the army, exposing him to certain death ... The line is a reference to Milton, too, I suppose, whose latinisms and inversions accompany intensities of feeling, either to support or mock them, throughout the book.' William Meredith, 'A Bright Surviving Actual Scene: Berryman's Sonnets', in *Berryman's Understanding*, p.102.

<sup>35</sup> David is evoked again in Sonnet 24. The poet returns Chris's question, enquiring as to why he loves her, with his own, asking how she could possibly love him. This time he considers himself rather inferior since 'no Goliath [he] has slung low,' a remark on his cowardice.

Divers make round a wrack, régime, domain  
 Invisible, to us-inured invisible stain  
 Of all our process; also lightning flash  
 Limns us audacious, furtive, whom slow crash  
 On crash jolt like the mud- and storm-blind Wain.

If the rain ceased and the incredible sun  
 Shone out! . . . whom our stars shake, could we emerge  
 Trustful and clear into the common rank,—  
 So long deceiving?—Days when Dathan sank  
 Quick to the pit not past, darling, we verge  
 Daily O there: have strange changes begun?

The sense of transgression is given a religious gravity by the allusion to Dathan. Dathan was one of the leaders of the revolt against Moses and Aaron, challenging both their authority and the exclusivity of the priesthood. Moses protested that it was in fact God's will and authority that the rebels were challenging, rather than theirs, since this state of affairs had been ordained by Him. Moses' position was vindicated by way of the unusual death suffered by Dathan and his associates after they did not heed his warnings. The ground opened up and swallowed them alive, God reasserting the strong arm of the Law Himself.<sup>36</sup> Hence, as in Sonnet 21, the allusion provides the poem with an extra and more disturbing layer of anxiety, adding to the degree of necessary bravery with which he must pursue his love.

His desire is for the relationship not just to be acceptable in the eyes of the world, but also in the eyes of God. The latter, he realises, is by far the more difficult; as Linebarger notes: 'he realises that he cannot deny the religious law for very long; he realizes that the only way to salvage anything from the relationship is to unite the two laws by marrying [Chris]'. Sonnets 19, 69 and 93, suggests Linebarger, also express this desire.<sup>37</sup> In Sonnet 93 this conflict is portrayed as one between his 'wild' streak, which

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<sup>36</sup> Numbers 16.1-35.

<sup>37</sup> Linebarger, *John Berryman*, p.55.

he blames on the man who encouraged him to climb the oil derrick at nine, and his desire for a normal married life with her:

. . . we overgrow  
 My derrick into midnights and high dawn,  
 The riot where I'm happy—still I hope  
 Sometime to dine with you, sometime to go  
 Sober to bed, a proper citizen.

The ending of this sonnet is unusually optimistic; he senses the beginning of a time when the conflicts of his conscience, as well as the social and family conflicts, are reconciled. Elsewhere, such reconciliation is portrayed as impossible.

Several sonnets are characterised by a more frivolous use of Old Testament imagery. In Sonnet 81, following the tedious trope concerning the water-spider's shadow, he depicts his neurotic anxiety on waiting for a letter from Chris, his sense of impending doom being 'as Gath in Babylon'. 'Tell it not in Gath' was a famous proverb indicating disaster.<sup>38</sup> Gath was the Philistine city afflicted with disease when the Ark of the Covenant was taken there; it was captured by David and eventually destroyed by the Assyrians in 712 BCE.<sup>39</sup> The allusion lends a sense of ironic gravity to the situation, in which he fears the possible doom of not receiving a letter.

In Sonnet 110, the poet role-plays himself as 'Moses', the prophet of the Law, whilst Chris becomes the 'SS woman'. Comparing their relationship to that between a Jew and an SS officer may seem a rather facile metaphor with which to depict the power relationship of love: the one in love is always at the mercy of the one loved; Chris is

<sup>38</sup> eg. 2 Sam 1.20, Mic 1.10.

<sup>39</sup> 1 Sam 5.6, 2 Chr 26.6; W. R. F. Browning, *Oxford Dictionary of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.146.

able to call the shots, and the poet is perturbed by the apparent cruelty of the situation. However, the fact that he identifies himself as, not just any old Israelite, but 'Moses', implies an even greater degree of indignity on the part of the poet. Even someone as powerful and God-favoured as the prophet and Lawgiver is subject, by love's oppression, to his beloved's fascistic will. In the context of the overriding Law metaphor of *Sonnets*, it is clear also that this is another expression of religious conscience; once again the Law of God is being subjugated within him by the law of love.

### **The Lost Christian**

In *Sonnets*, the representation of his religious conscience is fundamentally Jewish rather than Christian, the imagery being drawn almost exclusively from the Old, rather than New, Testament. Christian writers, however, notably Donne, John Bunyan and Søren Kierkegaard, are alluded to in order to make certain key points or provide necessary imagery. For instance, the struggle of faith and conscience in the light of his sustained sin is humorously portrayed in Sonnet 111, which is steeped in the language and figurativeness of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*:

Christian to Try: 'I am so coxed in it,  
 All I can do is pull, pull without shame,  
 Backwards,—on the coxswain fall the fiery blame,  
 I slump free and exhausted.'—'Stop a bit,'  
 Try studied his sloe gin, 'if you must fit  
 A trope so, you must hope to quit the game'  
 Pursued my brown friend with the plausible name  
 'Before your heart enlarging mucks you. Minute  
 By minute you pull faster.'—But I too  
 Am named, though lost . . . you learn God's will, give in.  
 After, and whatever, you sit on, you sit  
 Try 'Quit' said 'and be free.' I freeze to you  
 And I am free now of the fire of this sin

I choose . . . I lose, yes . . . but then I submit!

The notion of involuntary religious identity, where one is subject to the conscience of an unchosen faith, is an essential aspect of Berryman's use of Bunyan's glaringly epithetical proper nouns. The poet becomes 'Christian', the hero of Bunyan's work, and a knowingly 'implausible' name for the adulterer of *Sonnets*. The name 'Try', though not the character himself, is also derived from *Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan, employing the colloquialisms of his day, uses the term 'try' as an 'interrogative participle formed from "trow ye" (believe you)'.<sup>40</sup> In the sonnet 'Try' becomes a pun, conveying both the Bunyanesque and the more conventional sense of the word.

The poet's identification of himself as Christian is one that invites and acknowledges disbelief from the reader; his 'brown friend' has the 'plausible name'. His remark about Try evokes the trial of Faithful in *Pilgrim's Progress*, in which Faithful is maliciously slandered by Envy: 'My Lord, this man, notwithstanding his plausible name, is one of the vilest men in our country.'<sup>41</sup> It conveys Christian's contemptuous irritation towards Try, the nagging voice of his conscience. Furthermore, 'brown' represents all that the poet regards as undesirably dull about Christian morality in *Sonnets*. In Sonnet 58, for instance, the poet disavows the life that is 'sensible, coarse, and moral; in decent brown', in favour of a more exciting and indulgent lifestyle. For the latter, he conjures up the image—reminiscent of Bunyan's 'Vanity Fair'—of a decadent eighteenth century pleasure ground, symptomatic of 'the corruption of the working classes',<sup>42</sup> in

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<sup>40</sup> eg. "'Lo" saith he [Mr Great-heart], "this is the spring that Christian drank of, before he went up this Hill, and then 'twas clear and good; but now 'tis dirty with the feet of some that are not desirous that pilgrims should quench their thirst." Thereat Mercy said. "And why so envious, try?"' John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* ed. by Roger Sharrock (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1965), p.264.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p.130.

<sup>42</sup> Weiser identifies this as a contemporary reference, a quotation from Book II of W. C. Williams's *Paterson*; however, the relevant passage from Williams's work bears only the slightest resemblance: 'Among / the working classes SOME sort / of breakdown has occurred.' *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1946, repr. 1963), pp.66-67. Weiser, 'In and Out', p.398.

which ‘conjugal’, or marital love and fidelity, has been relegated to a side-show: illicit sex in the form of the ‘Reno brothels’ has replaced this cornerstone of Christian society as the main attraction.<sup>43</sup>

Berryman, a former rower himself, institutes a jocular rowing trope;<sup>44</sup> Christian is accompanied in the boat by ‘Try’, the voice of his conscience; the dull, unglamorously virtuous ‘brown friend’. The metaphor is straightforward enough: Christian’s own will is divided; he is subject to the direction of the ‘coxswain’. Responsibility for the course steered consequently falls on the coxswain, whom he blames, but the coxswain is his own concupiscence. With all his will and effort he is pulling himself, morally speaking, ‘backwards’; he is exerting his will in continuous pursuit of his adulterous liaisons, a direction clearly contrary to the faithful living of a Christian vocation. The real ‘Christian’, the hero of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, perseveres with his arduous journey towards the City, with the help of certain good counsel and encouragement, despite the challenges he encounters along the way. However, because Berryman’s Christian is wilfully acting contrary to the demands of his name, he is in danger of wrecking the trope altogether, rendering it unworkable.

The inspiration for Christian’s regressive rowing comes from the character ‘By-ways’ in *Pilgrim’s Progress*; By-ways says of his great-grandfather that he ‘was but a waterman, looking one way and rowing another: and I got most of my estate by the same occupation.’ The family character trait By-ways has inherited is a cowardly and duplicitous opportunism; he is always prepared to compromise his faith for popularity and be carried along with the spirit of the times, rather than holding fast to the path that

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<sup>43</sup> ‘Reno brothels’ refers to the brothels of the city of Reno in Nevada, a state where licensed brothels are legal.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. DS 70. See also ‘The Imaginary Jew’, in *Recovery*, p.245; Haffenden, *Life of John Berryman*, p.59.

leads to eternal life.<sup>45</sup> Christian, here, rather than rising to the demands of his name, is instead exerting himself away from the destination of the faithful, pursuing his own will. Paradoxically, and perversely, sin in this case is actually more of an effort. The tension arises from the disparity between how he should choose to act, in accordance with a Christian conscience, and how he actually does choose to act; after all, as a *Christian*, he should 'hope to quit' the adulterous affair to make the trope work.

Hence, the notion of the 'trope' itself in this case becomes a metaphor for the correct and harmonious structuring of one's existence; one's moral decisions should maintain as their primary reference point 'God's will'. The struggle with his conscience is represented as a conflict between his own will (the desire to follow his concupiscence) and the will of God (the restraining inner voice coaxed by Try). He will resist the latter whilst he has the psychological, amoral strength; remaining a slave to his concupiscence, and only 'slump free' when the sin has exhausted itself, either through circumstance or emotional fatigue. By not quitting the relationship he is advised that his 'heart enlarging' will consequently 'muck him'. He will become emotionally wrecked by the experience; but in view of the significance of the word 'muck' in *Pilgrim's Progress*, this also implies his potential spiritual wrecking. 'Muck' is commonly employed as a metaphor for the worldly and degenerate, those who willingly forsake the Kingdom for short-term material or carnal preoccupations. For instance, there is the vision of the 'muckraker' that Christiana is shown in the House of the Interpreter. In the first 'significant room' she witnesses the sight of a man

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<sup>45</sup> Concerning the extent of his dedication to the faith, By-ways claims: 'Tis true, we somewhat differ in religion from those of the stricter sort, yet but in two small points: first, we never strive against the wind and tide; secondly, we are always most zealous when religion goes in his silver slippers; we love to walk with him in the street if the sun shines and people applaud it.' Relating how he got his name, By-ways claims: 'The worst that ever I did to give them occasion to give me this name was that I had always the luck to jump in my judgement with the present way of the times, whatever it was, and my chance was to get thereby; but if things are thus cast upon me, let me count them a blessing, but let not the malicious load me therefore with reproach.' Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, pp.136-37.

who could look no way but downwards, with a muck-rake in his hand. There stood also one over his head with a celestial crown in his hand, and proffered to give him that crown for his muck-rake; but the man did neither look up, nor regard, but raked to himself the straws, the small sticks, and dust off the floor.

Then said Christiana, I persuade myself that I know somewhat the meaning of this: for this is a figure of a man of the world, is it not, good sir?

*Interpreter.* Thou hast said right, said he, and his muck-rake doth show his carnal mind [...] it is to let thee know that earthly things when they are with power upon men's minds quite carry their hearts away from God.

*Christiana.* Then said Christiana, O! deliver me from this muck-rake.<sup>46</sup>

The Interpreter also shows Christiana the vision of the field with the corn whose heads are missing, leaving only straw. Asked what to do with the crop, Christiana advises: 'burn some and make muck of all the rest'. The Interpreter explains that this is indeed the fate of men who produce no spiritual fruits; they are burned and trodden under the foot of men.<sup>47</sup> Try therefore warns Christian about allowing his heart only to swell for earthly goals, as he is forsaking a heavenly destiny for condemnation. Christian, however, rows on even harder, but explains his motives. Clearing up the matter of his religious affiliation, the poet affirms that he *is* a Christian, and is so named, but he is 'lost'. The ellipsis of line 10—a dramatic device characteristic of *The Dream Songs*—signifies the strangled confidence and musing of the poetic voice as he identifies the nature of his struggle; it is between his will and God's will.

The sonnet identifies the root of his guilt in the sequence as a whole: he does not submit to the affair reluctantly, but rather pursues it with the full effort of his will, rowing on against his cramping inner voice. He will submit to God's will 'after'. The poet, through a further allusion to Bunyan's story, implies that a paradoxically active form of spiritual sloth is to blame for his reluctance to submit: 'whatever, you sit on, you sit'. The pilgrims are warned on several occasions about resting in certain dangerous places of

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.247.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.250.

repose, such as the 'Hill Difficulty', and the Arbours of 'The Slothful's Friend' and 'The Enchanted Ground'; those who sit in such places fall permanently asleep, never to rouse themselves again to continue their journey to the Kingdom.<sup>48</sup> The implication of Bunyan's trope is that those who do not vigilantly maintain their spiritual development, and allow themselves to be overcome by worldly temptations, have a much harder task muscling their wills back towards piety.

Berryman's Christian resists mustering the exertion of will necessary for him to forsake his sin, though paradoxically he finds it harder to row against the tide of the heavenly, rather than worldly, zeitgeist. His way of dealing with 'Try', the Christian voice of his conscience, is to 'freeze' him out so that he does not feel 'the fire of this sin'. Echoing the words of Honest in *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian freezes his heart to the counsel of Try, resisting any 'thaw' of righteousness.<sup>49</sup> Instead, he decides to take the route of tragic inevitability represented by the closing lines; his is a course of action he knows will lead to grief and personal loss; only when the inevitable loss occurs, with nothing left to 'lose', will he finally 'submit'.

The notion of the tormented lover being a 'lost Christian' is an important factor in the psychological, as well as moral, tension of the sonnets. This provides the basis also for the eschatological imagery which, as will be seen, provides a dramatic background to the sequence. The inner battle of wills prefigures the poet's portrayal of the faith conflict in *The Dream Songs*, in which the conflict of conscience becomes more externalised as a direct conflict with God. There is the strong possibility that Sonnet 111, until the additions of 1966, was intended to be the final poem of the sequence.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, pp.265, 356-59.

<sup>49</sup> Honest says of his town of Stupidity: 'Yes, we lie more off from the sun, and so are more cold and senseless; but was a man in a mountain of ice, yet if the sun of righteousness will arise upon him, his frozen heart shall feel a thaw; and thus it hath been with me.' Ibid, p.301.

supplying an inconclusive and pessimistic end, but one which foregrounds the religious aspect of the drama.<sup>50</sup>

The notion of the lost Christian is also portrayed in Sonnet 102. Inspired by a nightmare in which he was chased by a killer, Berryman once again draws from the Old Testament to depict his sense of waywardness:<sup>51</sup>

A penny, pity, for the runaway ass!  
 A nickel for the killer's twenty-six-mile ride!  
 Ice for the root rut-smouldering inside!  
 —Eight hundred weeks I have not run to Mass.—  
 Toss Jack a jawful of good August grass!  
 'Soul awful,' pray for a soul sometimes has cried!  
 Wire reasons he seasons should still abide!  
 —Hide all your arms where he is bound to pass.—

Who drew me first aside? her I forgive,  
 Or him, as I would be forgotten by  
 O be forgiven for salt bites I took.  
 Who drew me off last, willy-nilly, live  
 On (darling) free. If we meet, know me by  
 You own exempt (I pray) and earthly look.

The image of the 'runaway ass' is taken from Job 39.5-8:

Who has let the wild ass go free?  
 Who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass,  
 to whom I have given the steppe for his home,  
 and the salt land for his dwelling place?  
 He scorns the tumult of the city;  
 he hears not the shouts of the driver.  
 He ranges the mountains as his pasture,  
 and he searches after every green thing.

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<sup>50</sup> Berryman's intentions on this matter are not altogether clear. Sonnet 111 is missing from TS-1, but is included and numbered in CTS-1, which is the TS Berryman later amended for the 1966 publication. Consequently, it seems that, although Sonnet 111 was written during the same period as the original batch of sonnets, it is included as the final poem only in the carbon copy of the typescript. Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p.313.

<sup>51</sup> Mariani, *Dream Song*, p.194.

The poet takes and subverts the imagery of Job; his ass took ‘salt bites’ from the salt land and also rampantly goes after everything green; being a debauched ass, however, he is hungry for jawfuls of a different form of grass (a ‘nickel’ is slang for five dollars worth of Marijuana). He is also a horny ass; he is in his ‘rut’, or breeding season; so much so that he appeals for ice for his smouldering member (‘root’ being slang for penis). The sonnet also recalls the story of another wayward ass of the Hebrew Bible. Balaam’s ass received beatings from her master after she kept infuriatingly straying from the road; but Balaam did not see what the ass could see, the angel of the Lord with a sword barring their way.<sup>52</sup> Berryman’s ass is in the inverse situation. The angel of the Lord was barring the prophet Balaam from making a journey against God’s will, for he was on his way to Moab to curse the Israelites, having been summoned by Balak. Berryman’s ass, however, has been diverted from the righteous path of God’s will, not by the angel, but by various people in his life who have successfully tempted him. He was once, as he recalls, a Mass-going Catholic (and Episcopalian), but he has not run to Mass for about fifteen years. He still retains a sense of sin, however, and invites prayers for his desperate soul; he also invites reasons—which he is nevertheless inured to—why he should still abide in the faith.

The attitude towards his faith situation is typical in its despairing ambivalence; he bewails his ‘soul awful’, but also regards those who do not share his moral scruples as free spirits. He forgives those who drew him aside, including Chris, the one who ‘willy-nilly’ drew him off last. Chris is free in conscience, ‘exempt’ in her own mind from the ties of the Law. Her more secular ‘earthly’ perspective, especially her apparent freedom from the inhibitions which afflict him, is part of the attraction. Paradoxically, he prays that she will know him again by this ‘earthly look’: not only because this is a defining

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<sup>52</sup> Numbers 22.21-35.

characteristic of one he loves in her entirety, but also because there is a chance their illicit love can be stirred again. The ass has been diverted by his own desire.

The guilt over his adultery is also powerfully expressed in terms of human betrayal, such as in Sonnet 69; but even here, his religious conscience seems to encroach:

For you am I collared to quit my dear  
 My redhaired mild good and most beautiful  
 Most helpless and devoted wife? I pull  
 Crazy away from this; but too from her  
 Resistlessly I draw off, months have, far  
 And quarrelling—irrelation—numb and dull  
 Dead Sea with tiny aits . . . Love at the full  
 Had wavered, seeing, foresuffering us here.

Unhappy all her lone strange life until  
 Somehow I friended it. And the Master catches  
 Me strongly from behind, and clucks, and tugs.  
 He has, has he? my heart-relucting will.  
 She spins on silent the great needle scratches.  
 —This all, Chris? and stark kisses, stealthy hugs?

His struggling with the prospect of leaving his affectionately described wife is the conceptual motivation behind the sonnet's central wrestling metaphor. In a poignant depiction of his emotional predicament, he attempts to resist the temptation to leave her for Chris, but at the same time struggles with an involuntary revulsion towards her, which, in turn, propels him away from the marriage. The marriage is to him as dead as the 'Dead Sea', and he suggests its difficulties were a prefiguring, or 'foresuffering', of his relationship with Chris. The familiar desires and conflicts of his adultery are there: pity for his wife and self-loathing over the 'stealthy' nature of the affair; there is a longing to make the relationship respectable through marriage, for which guilt over the hurt-inflicting end of his current one is a heartrending obstacle.

His main assailant, however, in this wrestling bout of conscience would appear to be either God or the devil, or, since a duel with one implies the involvement of the other, in either case with both. It is most likely to be God who roughly has his 'heart-relucting will' in a lock, particularly since the manifestation of His will, in the form of the Law, is the main identified source of conflict in *Sonnets*. 'Master' is the term with which Christ is addressed in the King James Bible;<sup>53</sup> it is also the term that Henry sarcastically employs for God in *The Dream Songs* ('Ol' Marster') to denote the Master / slave relationship he feels He has with him.<sup>54</sup> In the case of the sonnet, the poet's will is forced by guilt into not, for now, leaving his wife; although this is against the desire of his heart, which is orientated towards Christ. God 'clucking' and tugging him (by his conscience) from behind would appear to be an appropriate expression of divine displeasure towards his actions. The term 'Master', however, could also apply to the Devil, in view of Christ's term for him.<sup>55</sup> This would make less semantic sense, however. In this case, the Devil has a hold on the poet's will, forcing him, against the better judgement of his heart, to pursue his mistress. 'The Master's' action, however, especially the 'clucking' with disapproval, suggests an act of disapprobation rather than an immoral impulsion from another agency. In contrast, Weiser categorically insists that 'the Master' refers to Sigmund Freud, in view of its appearance in Sonnet 82.<sup>56</sup>

Why can't, Chris, why shouldn't *they* fall in love?  
 Mild both, both still in mix of studies, still  
 Unsteadied into life, novices of the will,  
 Formed upon others (us), disciples of  
 The Master and the revisionists: enough  
 Apart from their attraction, to unstill  
 The old calm loves (cyclonic loves) until

<sup>53</sup> eg. Matthew 21.3.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. *Dream Songs* 51, 113.

<sup>55</sup> This is an identification Linebarger also makes in 'A Commentary on *Berryman's Sonnets*', *John Berryman Studies*, 1.1 (1975), 13-24 (p.19); cf. 'The ruler of this world' (RSV), 'prince of this world' (AV), John 12.31. Cf. also Henry's term for the Devil, 'Lord of Matter', in *Dream Song* 17.

<sup>56</sup> Weiser, 'In and Out', p.399.

The electric air shocks them together, rough,  
 But better in love than grief, who can afford  
 No storms (ours). Fantasy! . . . Forget.

The sonnet depicts the poet debating with Chris the possibility of their own respective spouses falling in love with one another, and so consequently letting them off the hook. They have a lot in common: ‘both’, as he has also revealed to us in other sonnets, are ‘mild’, both are academics, and both are only ‘novices of the will’.<sup>57</sup> They are novices since it is by them, or the storm that they create, that they will be thrown together, rather than by an exertion of their own will. In contrast, the poet and Chris are experts of the will, since they have made the effort to undertake the affair, despite its difficulties and dangers. The reference to the ‘revisionists’ does not in itself imply that ‘the Master’ is intended to be Freud, since revisionism is a widely applied term across various disciplines. However, in view of both Berryman’s and his wife Eileen’s interest in psychoanalysis, it is possible. Eileen was a psychology graduate at the time and intended to take up psychoanalysis; Berryman, along with others, criticised her for imagining Freud and psychoanalysis were reconcilable with her Catholicism.<sup>58</sup> The term in this sense is most likely a jibe about what he regards as his wife’s split loyalties; using Freud and revisionism as an ironic metaphor, and recalling Christ’s saying that ‘no man can serve two masters’, he regards Eileen as a follower of Christ, and of those who have ‘revised’ belief in the ‘absolute truth’ of the faith.<sup>59</sup> In any case, regarding Freud as ‘the Master’ referred to in Sonnet 69 would not be very helpful to any interpretation of that particular poem.

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. 21, 33, 42, and 69; both Chris’s husband and Berryman’s wife Eileen were graduate students at the time of the affair. Mariani, *Life of Berryman*, p.186-87.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p.197.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Matthew 6.24.

Also significant is the infernal imagery of the sonnet. In Canto V of the *Inferno*, the pilgrim visits the Second Circle of Hell where the lustful are punished by being forever whirled around in a cyclonic wind. Several of the lovers who appear in *Sonnets*, including Dido, Helen, Achilles and Paris, are witnessed there; but most famously, the adulterous couple, Francesca Da Rimini and Paolo. The poet hopes that there is enough electricity between their spouses to ‘unstill / The old calm loves’ and whip them up in an adulterous cyclone like theirs. Unfortunately, the poet realises this is an exercise in wishful thinking (‘Fantasy!’) on his part, and quickly abandons the notion, opting instead to wallow forgetfully in the all-consuming passion he experiences for Chris.

However, even at moments when all else seems drowned out by the storm of infatuation—as depicted by the weather metaphor of Sonnet 2—his Christian conscience pierces like a lance: ‘My vow!’ he suddenly exclaims in the middle of the sensuous closing lines. Furthermore, the ambiguity inherent in the sestet of the second sonnet shows how difficult his Christian conscience is to assuage. Within the rolling thunder of Chris’s presence he comes to learn ‘deafening rumours of / The complete conversations of the angels’, an experience which makes him both ‘fearful and happy’.

### **The New Faith**

The notion of being a disciple of both ‘the Master and the revisionists’ is one that is also applicable to the inner conflict of the poet. He portrays himself as a profane revisionist of the Law and the Faith; the law of love, which conflicts with the Law of God, becomes the religion of love, a faith which is in direct opposition to Christianity. In

Sonnet 67 the difference between the acquisitions of the two faiths is one between conquest and choice:

Faith like the warrior ant swarming, enslaving  
 Or griding others, you gave me soft as dew,  
 My darling, drawing me suddenly into you

Religious faith is portrayed as predatory and tyrannical, compared to the tender new 'faith' in Chris that he willingly receives from her. It is a warm, all-consuming faith to which he abandons himself in their lovemaking as 'faiths other fall'. The sonnet represents, in this instance, not a conflict of the will, but a triumph of the will; the Law, as an obstacle barring the consummation of his desire, has here been soundly defeated. There are consequently different forms of response in the sonnets to the uprising of conscience with which he was clearly afflicted during the course of the affair. At times he felt threatened by the full weight of divine retribution, and the involuntary resurgence of a Judeo-Christian moral conscience; elsewhere, he responds to the warrior Faith's 'enslaving', with a confidently rebellious vaunting of the profane counter-religion.

In Sonnet 71 Berryman draws extensively from the imagery and conception of Wallace Stevens's celebratory secular vision of 'Sunday Morning', as he contemplates the paradise on earth that has eclipsed his desire to seek it elsewhere. The scene is 'the grove', the regular meeting place for the lovers' trysts:<sup>60</sup>

Our Sunday morning when dawn-priests were applying  
 Wafer and wine to the human wound, we laid  
 Ourselves to cure ourselves down: I'm afraid  
 Our vestments wanted, but Francis' friends were crying  
 In the nave of pines, sun-satisfied, and flying

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<sup>60</sup> Haffenden records that Berryman wrote the sonnet, influenced by Stevens's poem, on the early morning of 17 July 1947, as he waited in the grove for Chris's arrival. On this occasion she never arrived. Haffenden, *Life of Berryman*, p.176.

Subtle as angels about the barricade  
 Boughs made over us, deep in a bed half made  
 Needle-soft, half the sea of our simultaneous dying.

‘Death is the mother of beauty.’ Awry no leaf  
 Shivering with delight, we die to be well . .  
 Careless with sleepy love, so long unloving.  
 What if our convalescence must be brief  
 As we are, the matin meet the passing bell? . .  
 About our pines our sister, wind, is moving.

Imagining the saying of the Mass that would be occurring at that instant elsewhere, his sense of, on this occasion, fearless transgression prompts this paean to earthly love in the form of a mock Eucharistic rite. The opening lines scornfully reduce the sacrifice of the Mass to an empty ritual; it is not the body and blood of Christ, but only the unconverted ‘wafer and wine’ that is applied as an illusory antidote to human suffering. The representation of their illicit lovemaking as a healing sacrifice becomes an impious alternative to that of the Eucharist; the offering of themselves to each other, rather than the offering of Christ, brings their own brand of salvation in the face of mortality. It is the materialistic salvation implied by Stevens’s poem that the lovers seek; that is, they will devote themselves to the paradisiacal experience of the here and now, rather than chase a potentially fantastical one. This includes an acceptance of death as part of the cycle of nature that brings new birth, as well as an enhanced appreciation of the cycle’s role in earthly beauty. ‘Death is the mother of beauty’ for Stevens because, as Merle Brown remarks, ‘one can experience beauty, can love a thing or a person, only if he at the same time experiences the painful sense that the loss of that thing or person is imminent, that its mortality is a quality immanent in its living presence’.<sup>61</sup>

In the sestet of Sonnet 71, it is this anxiety about the transience of their earthly love which arouses the intensity of his desire for them to remain in their dying, or knowingly

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<sup>61</sup> Merle Brown, *Wallace Stevens: The Poem As Act* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), p.161.

mortal, state; where they are ‘careless with sleepy love’ in their post-coital afterglow. He senses the earthly elements, including their ‘sister wind’, moving around them; the surrounding shift of time reminds him that their worldly bliss cannot last, but this is the mark of its preciousness. However, amid the seemingly confident portrayal of blasphemous indifference, it is clear that the sonnet also intends an accompanying sense of unease. There is a further anxiety behind this sense of transience, punningly suggested by the orgasmic act of their ‘simultaneous dying’. The juxtaposition of the poet’s parody of the Mass, parallel to the sacrifice of the ‘dawn-priests’, indicates an accompanying spiritual death. Furthermore, the ‘passing bell’—a signal which calls for prayers for the deceased at the point of death— suggests a degree of uncertainty and vulnerability concerning the nature of the new life this spiritual death may bring in its wake. This unease is also apparent in the sonnet’s depiction of the impious rite inside nature’s church; the description of the singing birds conveys a sense of sorrow on behalf of Saint Francis’s associates, as they weep over the poet’s spiritual suicide. However, whether time’s passage will bring an awakening of conscience, eternal death, or merely a change of circumstance, the moment of love they enjoy now, by its very nature, will not live on.

The profane parody of Sonnet 71 is one that is firmly rooted in the tradition of courtly love. Lewis notes how the Ovidian mock-religion of the love god Amor, which the courtly love tradition inherited, took on a parodic tendency during the middle-ages: ‘this erotic religion arises as a rival or a parody of the real religion and emphasises the antagonism of the two ideals.’<sup>62</sup> Berryman’s parody is one that also emphasises this antagonism; although, as we have seen, the parody is itself antagonised by a conscience based on the ‘real religion’. Nevertheless, the poet does comprehensively depict this

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<sup>62</sup> Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, p.18.

mock-religion of his own. He takes the courtly love convention of the veneration of the beloved to an extreme; Chris is portrayed as an object of, not just veneration, but worship. This provides for a more involving elaboration of the sonnets' central trope. depicting his inner conflict of conscience; that is, the conflict between the two laws, or two religions.

In Sonnet 8 it is Chris's 'grey blue' eyes that provide for his 'incurable sins some salve'; she is also, however, portrayed as the root and instigator of his sin. The new faith in Chris has displaced faith in God for the poet, as his love becomes all-consuming. The representation of this is apparent, for instance, in Sonnet 66; amongst the language of 'astronomies and slangs', he searches for suitable epithets to depict her exalted form. She becomes monotheistically divine, unseating God to become the 'star, art-breath, crowner, conscience', and the poet is her 'choir' to sing her praises. Her metaphorical divinity is more explicit in Sonnet 90 as she becomes the 'avatar, / The goddess grounded'; here the trope conveys the uncanny power she has over him, as well as the self-glorifying use she makes of his anguish.

As she is the divine source of inspiration behind the sonnets, he becomes her willing parasite, feeding off her in the cause of his art. In Sonnet 100, an electricity metaphor depicts the inspiration she supplies to his work between their trysts: 'The Muse is real. the random shades I stitch— / Devoted vicarage—somewhere real, and steady.' She as goddess is real; the 'shades', or disembodied spirits he receives from her, he then turns into the concrete reality of art. He is the 'devoted vicarage'; as the vicarage houses the representative of Christ, so he is the house of the representative of the goddess Chris: he houses the artistic inspiration that both emanates from and represents her. A similar image of parasitical spirituality is to be found in Sonnet 14 where he portrays himself as

her 'ghost, this pale ridiculous thing', an image prompted by the sight of the white moths clinging to the porchlight. He pays the ultimate price for this devotion, becoming her 'astonished martyr'. Although one of the later 1966 additions, he re-enters the spirit of the mock-religion trope in Sonnet 112. Here the poet presents us with the wistful image of her voice's memory choiring into his 'transept', he being a church built for her worship and a 'willing accomplice in the cult'.

Elsewhere, Chris is also the practitioner, as well as the object, of this mock-religion. In Sonnet 19 she is the 'priestess', and in an image of Old Testament sacrifice, he becomes her "best 'burnt offering'" whom she sacrifices without remorse. This pagan profanation of Old Testament ritual, as in Sonnet 71, emphasises the poet's sense of transgression; he has placed himself outside God's Law, and is now 'lawless, empty, without rights.' However, in this case he ironically portrays himself as the innocent victim. According to Leviticus 1, the 'burnt offering' had to be a 'male without blemish'. There are further implications to his metaphorical use of the holocaust rite. The priest immolated the victim on the altar, and poured the blood round its borders; after skinning, the sacrifice was burnt whole, with the exception of the skin, which was retained by the priest performing the ritual. Here, therefore, Chris has left him 'empty' after their first lovemaking, his blood dispersed on the sacrificial altar by her indifference.<sup>63</sup> Since the purpose of the sacrifice in Levitical law is 'atonement', there is the further implication that the poet is also being sacrificed for her own sin, as well as his own. Whereas the one who stated that 'remorse does not suit you at all' (her husband) might forgive her, the poet shakes with fear at her use of him as the atonement she must make to God.

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<sup>63</sup> Haffenden records that this sonnet relates to the night of the first occasion on which they slept together. Haffenden, *Life of Berryman*, pp.171-72.

This exaltation of Chris necessarily involves a degree of God-deprecation. Prefiguring God's frequent relegation to lower case in *The Dream Songs*, in Sonnet 104 he exclaims 'my god, this isn't what I want', as he finds himself fornicating with a 'five-foot piece' during the 'harrow-days' of his mistress's absence. But God is omnipresent in the sonnets, even when he does not explicitly impose himself on the poet's conscience in the shape of the Law. God remains as a latent metaphor; in Sonnet 92, for example, he remarks that 'Your Tetragrammaton—/ Bach, Mozart, Beethoven & Schubert—hears': the four composers displacing the real Tetragrammaton of YHWH.

In Sonnet 97, he again employs the 'faithful metaphors' of 'magic and warfare' to depict his incongruous sense of being both the predator and the bewitched; he is 'the hunter', and she, 'the witchwife'. They are only 'half-free', however, as they are 'half to the Provider and the Mystery- / riddler bound'. It is his conscience to which he is 'half-bound', the awareness of God being expressed in the language of primitive religion. However, his other half, it appears, is also not strictly free either; he is under 'the spell' and, with characteristic innuendo, a slave to his instincts: 'your languours / I wag my wolf's tail to'.

### **The Fate of the Heretic: the Sonnets' Eschatology**

Through the trope of the rival faith, the speaker's transgression becomes elevated to the status of heresy, and, like the heretic, he must face the ultimate sanction for his failure to recant. The threat to his life, however, comes not from any institutional authority, but from the speaker's own heart; self-destruction is portrayed as the seductive resolution to the speaker's despair, resulting both from his unrequited love and the guilt of the course

he pursues. Linebarger remarks that ‘the association of illicit love with death in *Tristan and Iseult* became one of the conventions of romantic love in a Christian culture’.<sup>64</sup> This aspect of the Christianised courtly love tradition becomes exacerbated to the point of hysteria in the *Sonnets*; suicide and fiery damnation become part of the fatalistic language of his hopelessly passionate love.

His self-struggle with the darker forces within is depicted in a variety of ways. In Sonnet 105 the familiar metaphor of bewitchment is developed into one of demonic possession. It is accompanied, somewhat humorously, by the exaggerated language of victim-hood, as he sings the pain of his regression ‘deeper into evil’ at a time when he should be becoming wiser:

Three, almost, now into the ass’s years,  
 When hard on burden burden galls my back,  
 I carry corn feeds others, only crack  
 Cudgels, kicks on me, mountainous arrears  
 Worsen—avulse my fiery shirt!—The spheres  
 May sing with pain, I grieve knee-down, I slack  
 Deeper in evil . . . love’s demoniac  
 Jerquer, who frisked me, hops aside and jeers.

The dog’s, and monkey’s years—pot’s residue,  
 Growling and toothless, giggling, grimacing—  
 I hope to miss. Who in my child could see  
 The adulter and bizarre of thirty-two?—  
 But I will seem more silent soon . . . mire-king.  
 Time, time that damns, disvexes. Unman me.

The sonnet is based around Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s fairy tale ‘The Life Span’. In the tale, God, on creating the world, allots thirty years of life each to the ass, dog, monkey and man. However, each of the animals complains, for various reasons, that thirty years is too much for them to endure, and so God offers them all reduced life

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<sup>64</sup> Linebarger, *John Berryman*, p.62.

spans. Man, on the other hand, complains that thirty years is not enough for him, and so God adds to the duration of his life the latter years of decline that he has taken away from the ass, dog and monkey (although man still complains that he would like more). Consequently, man ends up living seventy years. The first thirty are his human years, when he is healthy and full of *joie de vivre* in work and leisure. The following eighteen years, however, are the ass's years described in the sonnet, in which increasing burdens are heaped upon his back; he must carry the corn to feed others, and kicks and beatings are all the reward he gets for his service. Next will come his twelve dog years, which he will spend growling in the corner, having lost his teeth to bite with. Finally, he will experience the ten monkey years of his dotage, in which he does mindless things, becoming the butt of the childrens' jokes.<sup>65</sup>

The fable is deployed in the sonnet as a darkly seriocomic allegory of moral, as well as physical, decline; his transgressions have contributed to the self-inflicted hardships he must endure in the ass's years of his thirties. Whereas in Sonnet 102 he was the wild young 'runaway ass', now he has become the over-burdened middle-aged ass. It is here that the efficacy of the poet's recent stylistic innovations becomes most apparent. The violent energy of the poet's chopped asyndetic syntax batters the line between the 'kicks' and 'crack [of] cudgels' to the point where, hemmed in by persecution, the parenthesised outburst of 'avulse my fiery shirt!' comes as a natural momentary release for the reader. Whereas a penitent may put on a hair-shirt to expiate sins committed, here the speaker is trapped in the fiery instant-torment shirt of constantly-committed sin, one which he cannot relieve himself of. The image is also suggestive of Heracles's suffering in Ovid, when he put on the robe that his wife Deianeira had given him. In order to prevent the god from leaving her in favour of his new concubine, Iole, she had

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<sup>65</sup> Jacob Grimm, 'The Life Span', *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. by Jack Zipes (London: Bantam, 1992), pp.556-57.

covered the robe with the poisonous blood of the centaur Nessus, who had duped her into thinking that it would work as a love potion.<sup>66</sup> Overpowered by his desire, the weight of the speaker's transgressions drags him deeper down into the 'mire'. The image of 'love', as demonic possession, is reminiscent of the way madness is portrayed in the Gospels; the jeering 'demoniac jerquer' frisks him of his virtue and dignity.

Unlike the man in the Grimm tale, the speaker, in the sestet, does not hanker after more life, but rather an end to it, hoping to miss the further decline of his dog and monkey years. He contemplates with horror how far he has strayed from the ideals of his youth, as in Sonnet 45 when he remembered recoiling from the notion of adultery on reading Donne. However, although 'time'— which brings further moral regression and ultimately the end—may 'damn' him, it may also save him; the mellowing and dying potency of dotage will 'disvex' the passions of the speaker. His final appeal is to beckon this 'unmanning' process on, so old age may disable him from his ability to do evil.<sup>67</sup> Sonnet 105 hints at the possibility of suicide, which is often the temptation arising out of the affair's difficulties. In Sonnet 6, for instance, amidst the 'old silence' of Chris's absence, it is silence itself, the lure of hopeful nothingness, which speaks to him:

Deep down this building do I sometimes hear  
 Below the sighs and flex of the travelling world  
 Pyromaniacal whispers? . . . *Not to be*  
 They say *would do us good* . . . easy . . . the mere  
 Lick and a promise of a sweet flame curled  
 Fast on its wooden love: *silence our plea.*

When Chris does not appear to be reciprocating his love, he hears the infernal beckoning of self-destruction from below. As an adherent of the profane faith of illicit

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<sup>66</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 9.1-238

<sup>67</sup> Weiser notes how the speaker's final line recalls the plea of Lady Macbeth: 'Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here' (*Macbeth* I, v, 40-41). Weiser, 'In and Out', p.390.

love, it is the heretic's death at the stake which he contemplates; but the martyrdom will be self-inflicted, for it is the chosen fate of another famous abandoned lover, also evoked in Sonnet 55, that appeals to him. After Aeneas had left Carthage, Dido leapt into the flames of a large pyre she had had built. (Heracles also had himself burned on a pyre to end the agony caused by the poisonous robe.) Since it is associated with Chris, even this self-inflicted punishment becomes a carnal experience, as forbidden desire is made synonymous with death. The highly seductive nature of the suicidal temptation is aroused by the eroticised image of the 'sweet flame' licking and embroiling itself around his wood. The closing plea is double-edged; it is both an appeal to Chris to return and, in doing so, silence the lure of suicide; and also an entreaty towards the actual lure of suicide to fulfil and therefore silence itself. However, the subject of his suicidal devotion does not share this tendency. The subsequent sonnet of the sequence (7) recalls a quarrel he once had with Chris concerning a man who had jumped from the Empire State building, landing on a car below.<sup>68</sup> Whereas the speaker can understand the destructive act, she protests that 'one has a right not to be fallen on!' He reflects:

Did I divine then I must shortly run  
 Crazy with need to fall on you, despairing?  
 Did you bolt so, before it caught, our fire?

The sonnet illustrates another example of *inventio* at work, the way in which the poet 'immersed himself in the past without excluding his present experience'.<sup>69</sup> He depicts the emotion of real life events, retaining local detail—such as the recent Empire State Building suicide as the analogous despair of his unrequited love—with recourse to the traditional lexis of courtly love; here, 'fire' being the time-honoured metaphor for

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<sup>68</sup> Berryman alludes to this event in a letter written to Chris between 5 - 17 May 1947, before the affair had properly begun: 'You're a hedonist with a conscience about falling on people (except on *me*), and that's all I know'; quoted in Haffenden, *Life of Berryman*, p.169.

<sup>69</sup> Weiser, 'In and Out', p.388.

passionate desire. In fact, fire is the overwhelmingly dominant image of the sequence; it occurs, in one form or another, in seventeen of the sonnets<sup>70</sup>. However, this metaphor becomes infernalized in the context of the sonnets' religious tensions, serving as an eschatological threat in the struggle between the two faiths. For example, a suggestively flagrant backdrop arises against their lovemaking in Sonnet 37 as 'the high fire sings on to be fed / whipping our darkness by the lifting sea'. In Sonnet 66, he searches for an epithet that will glorify his mistress enough to 'justify' his 'daring fondle, fumble of far fire / Crackling nearby'. In both cases, an element of spiritual danger hangs like a disturbed conscience in the background; but, as it is expressed within the symbol of passionate love, that sense of danger becomes integral to the passion and excitement of the affair itself.

Not surprisingly, the despair of unrequited love is usually portrayed as a literal living 'hell' for the poet, employing a variety of other infernal imagery. In Sonnet 68, 'the grove'—a regular meeting place for their trysts—becomes 'Hell, / Unvisited these thousand years' when she fails to materialize. In Sonnet 12, the dark anxiety created by her absence is infiltrated by the violent image of mad parrots 'yattering up the cagy mind':

the damned female's yellow head swings blind.

Cageless they'd grapple. O where, whose Martini  
Grows sweeter with my torment, wrung on toward  
The insomnia of eternity, loud graves!  
Hölderlin on his tower sang like the sea  
More you adored that day than your harpsichord,  
Troubled and drumming, tempting and empty waves.

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<sup>70</sup> See Sonnets 6, 7, 19, 20, 28, 37, 65, 66, 68, 76, 83, 86, 102, 105, 111, 112, 113, and 116.

Separated from Chris, he feels caged in with his isolated grief, and he compares himself, not only to the damned, but also to another poet who fell madly in love with someone else's wife. Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) became passionately involved with Susette Gontard, the wife of the banker in whose household he was tutor; she is the 'Diotima' of his *Hyperion*. Their separation, and her death several years later, triggered a long period of insanity in Hölderlin, who was eventually taken in by the Zimmer family in Tübingen. Here he spent almost half his entire life, from 1807 onwards, living in his 'tower'—his room in the Zimmer household overlooking the Nechar Valley—where he spent a great deal of his time playing piano. The closing image of self-reflection, as he looks on like Hölderlin, is again one that evokes the lure of suicide, the 'tempting and empty waves' inviting his mortal company.

He compares himself to the ghost of Hamlet's father in Sonnet 14; he is one of the restless dead, hovering about Chris like a moth. Reversing the roles in Sonnet 28, she is the 'burning ghost' who has returned from her 'death of distance' from the poet; whilst his 'helpless glare' burns on with the intensity of her presence, as well as the impediment of her marriage. On a lighter note, in Sonnet 20 he marks the lively bicentennial celebrations of Princeton University by declaring 'hell is empty', a declaration that he would later make in Dream Song 56, in relation to Origen's heretical theory of apocatastasis.<sup>71</sup> Elsewhere, the infernal consequences of their sin are portrayed as a threat to be countered with renewed passion. In Sonnet 46 he punningly urges consummation of their lust before the onset of conscience: 'Hurry! till we, beginning our eternal / Junket on the winds, wake like a ton of Styx.'<sup>72</sup> Overall, the sequence as it

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<sup>71</sup> Weiser identifies this as an allusion to *The Tempest*: 'Hell is empty, / And all the devils are here!' (I, ii, 213-14). 'In and Out', p.391.

<sup>72</sup> This is the version as published in *Berryman's Sonnets*; TS-1, which is reprinted in *Collected Poems* reads: 'Hurry! we (ah), beginning our eternal / Junket on the winds, wake like a ton of Styx'. In the case

was left in 1948 is one that leaves the reader with a sense of unresolved despair; especially, ending as it did, with Sonnet 111.<sup>73</sup> However, when Berryman returned to the sequence eighteen years later, he added six new sonnets, which created a greater sense of closure, and even optimism.

**‘Hell to Purgatory, / then again downwards, has been fully penned’: The Conclusion of the Sonnets.**

The additional 1966 sonnets—107 and 112-17 in *Collected Poems*—demonstrate the way in which Berryman tries to re-enter the spirit of the original sequence, and to round off the narrative with an appropriately wistful conclusion which also offers a hopeful new beginning. As Sonnet 105 suspected, the mellowing effect of time had, towards Chris at least, finally ‘disvexed’ him. Stylistically, although he maintains the Petrarchan form, there are noticeable developments, and the new sonnets are much more reminiscent of the later Dream Songs from *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*. He distinguishes the new from the old by not, as a rule, capitalising the first letter of each line; and, in comparison with the original poems, they are freer, less cluttered, with the syntax not as intensely wrenched and desperate to cut a figure and solicit ambiguity. The poetic voice exhibits a much greater self-confidence of expression, with more of the jocular and self-aware irony of Henry coming through. Sonnet 107 appears particularly self-mocking, burlesquely sending-up the tortured strains of the youthful love-deranged poet. The whole experience with Chris is now viewed as a schooling in

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of this latter version, therefore, the poet makes this onset of conscience more immediate. Berryman, *Collected Poems*, pp.93, 309.

<sup>73</sup> As my commentary on this poem explained, there is some uncertainty as to whether Sonnet 111 was originally intended to close the sequence. However, the alternative, Sonnet 110, would end the sequence on an equally despairing note.

the ‘University of Soft Knocks’, enough to make a fellow mad enough to injure rhododendrons, and his balladic conclusion about the whole affair is touchingly straightforward:

He was in love and he was had.  
That was it: he should have stuck to his own mate,  
before he went a-conning across the sea-O.

Despite such charming Henryisms, however, a darker side to the speaker’s outlook is also revealed; especially in Sonnets 115 and 116, which convey an element of despondency more in keeping with the rest of the sequence. One gets the impression that at these moments the poet is finding the retrospective situation of the sonnets a useful outlet for more current sorrows. The most important of the new sonnets, in view of its revaluation of the now distant experience, is Sonnet 113, which assimilates both past and present into a moment of wondrous longing. He re-immerses himself in the tropes which are familiar from the rest of the sequence, such as the restless infernal imagery and—in traditional courtly love style—the sublime God-displacing deification of Chris; but these are accompanied by tropes more familiar from *The Dream Songs*, such as the allegorical use of religious art and references to the Gospel, as well as interaction with scholarly ideas and theories. He employs an allusion to his own unorthodox interpretation of an episode from the diary of Anne Frank, in order to contrast the Dutch girl’s emotional maturation with his own inability to raise himself above the great love of his past:

‘I didn’t see anyone else, I just saw Lies’  
Anne Frank remorseful from the grave: ah well,  
it was a vision of her mother in Hell.  
a payment beforehand for rebellion’s seize,  
whereby she grew up: springing from her knees  
she saw her parents level. I ward your spell

away, and I try hard to look at you level  
but that is quite unaccustomed to me, Lise.

Months I lookt up, entranced by you up there  
like a Goya ceiling which will not come down,  
in swirling clouds, until the end is here.  
Tetélestai. We steamed in a freighter from Spain  
& I will never see those frescoes again  
nor need to, having memorized your cloudy gown.

The quotation is taken from Anne's diary entry of Saturday, 27 November, 1943; at the time she was in hiding with her family in their secret living quarters in the midst of occupied Amsterdam. Whilst she, for the time being, feels relatively safe, she is anxious about the possible fate of her ex-best friend, 'Lies', whom she jealously fell out with after Lise started spending too much time with another girl. She describes a vision of the girl which she experienced as she was falling asleep:

I saw her in front of me, clothed in rags, her face thin and worn. Her eyes were very big and she looked so sadly and reproachfully at me that I could read in her eyes: 'Oh Anne, why have you deserted me? Help, oh, help me, rescue me from this hell!' [...] I just saw Lies, no one else, and now I understand. I misjudged her and was too young to understand her difficulties. She was attached to a new girl friend, and to her it seemed as though I wanted to take her away. What the poor girl must have felt like, I know; I know the feeling so well myself! Sometimes in a flash, I saw something of her life, but a moment later I was selfishly absorbed again in my own pleasures and problems. It was horrid of me to treat her as I did [...] I am not more virtuous than she; she, too, wanted to do what was right, [...] What was the difference between us? Why are we so far from each other now? [...] I wonder if she ever thinks of me; if so, what would she feel?<sup>74</sup>

For anyone acquainted with the diaries, the identification of 'Lies' with Anne's 'mother' appears baffling, a mistake too absurd for even the most casual reader of the book to make, let alone someone as intimately familiar with it as Berryman. Indeed, the sonnet would be utterly incomprehensible if the poet did not clearly expect its reader to know of the essay he wrote around the same time, 'The Development of Anne Frank':

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<sup>74</sup> Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, trans. by B. M. Mooyart-Doubleday (New York: Doubleday, 1967), pp.135-36. In 1955, Berryman assigned the book as required reading for his 'Humanities in the Modern World' course at the University of Minnesota.

or otherwise to be able to discern the arbitrary reasoning of his Freudian dream analysis in the poem.<sup>75</sup> Interpreting Anne's vision, the poet concludes that both the real 'object' and 'cause' of the 'passionate remorse' expressed in the dream is not her school friend at all; it is in fact her mother. Lies is merely a 'screen' for this 'transferred' subject of regret: 'What I think has happened [...] is that the girl is *paying beforehand*, with a torrent of affection and remorse, for the rebellion against her mother that then comes into the open.' The evidence for this, according to Berryman, is to found in certain subsequent entries which illustrate her growing sense of 'rivalry, maturity, independence of the mother'.<sup>76</sup> Such instances make the diary, in the poet's opinion, 'the most remarkable account of *normal* human adolescent maturation I have ever read'; the unique circumstances in which it was written helped produce one of the great 'conversion' narratives of all time, rivalled only by Saint Augustine's *Confessions*; it charts 'the conversion of a child into a person.'<sup>77</sup>

Anne quickly matures to the point where she can respect her mother more as an equal; where she can declare: 'I can't really love mummy in a dependent childlike way—I just don't have that feeling'. In comparison, the speaker in the sonnet concedes that no such adjustment has taken place within him with regard to Chris (or 'Lise' as she is identified here). Instead, maintaining the language of courtly love, he struggles against the power of her bewitchment, and, despite his best efforts, he holds her in the same exalted position that he always did. 'The Adoration of the Name of God', in the cupola of the Basilica del Pilar in Zaragoza, is the most likely 'Goya ceiling' that the poet has in mind

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<sup>75</sup> John Berryman, 'The Development of Anne Frank', *Freedom of the Poet*, pp.91-106. Both the sonnet and the essay were written in 1967, but the latter was not published during Berryman's lifetime.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, pp.99-100.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, pp.91-93.

as a simile.<sup>78</sup> The fresco, completed in 1772, depicts a large host of angels and cherubim glorifying the ‘Name of God’, represented by Hebrew letters enclosed within a triangle, which in turn symbolises complete perfection. The reference to the painting allows the shift from past to future tense, suggesting a continuation of the speaker’s love. The glory of God ‘will not come down’ in the shape of the Second Coming of Christ until the last day, the day of Judgement; neither will he feel levelled with Chris until the end of his life. He boldly employs the last words of Christ from John’s Gospel— ‘Tetélestai’: ‘it is accomplished’—to declare that the relationship has finally run its course and served its purpose.<sup>79</sup> However, Chris, the image of ultimate sublimity still subsists in his memory, and he doesn’t need to be reminded of Goya’s depiction, as long as his enduring love for Chris fulfils that need. Neither will Chris be removed from her exalted position until the end of his life, even though he has, figuratively speaking, since sailed on.

The passage from Anne Frank’s diary reproduced above also provides us with an important insight as to why Berryman chose the name of ‘Lise’—the English spelling of the Dutch name ‘Lies’— as a pseudonym for Chris when he came to publish the sonnets in 1967. Firstly, through her association with Anne’s deserted friend, he is able to heighten the pathos of what he presents as a very much belated public devotion to his mistress. Anne jealously spurned Lies when she appeared to choose another girl’s company over hers, and now, in the light of the uncertainty of her absence, she comes to view the situation more from Lies’s point of view; her affection now manifests itself

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<sup>78</sup> Berryman visited Spain in 1957, enthusiastically touring its Cathedrals, churches and art museums. See Mariani, *Dream Song*, pp.323-26.

<sup>79</sup> Another allusion to John’s Gospel appears in Sonnet 54, where he describes the crowds by the ‘artificial pool’ as being like a ‘shore for the Fourth’: in other words, the scene resembles those of John 6, in which crowds flock to meet Jesus wherever he lands on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

more in terms of a concern for her well-being, pining curiosity, and a longing to be reunited with her.

The speaker is consequently drawing parallels between himself and Chris, who forsook the poet to remain with her husband, and, now, at a stage far removed from the intensity of the affair, he is able to be more sympathetic towards her motives, and to serve her memory with affection rather than resentment. The association also brings a certain amount of guilt, however, because he has ‘deserted’ her memory by leaving her praise publicly unsung all these years; but now he is desirous to make it up to her. Moreover, according to the poet’s interpretation of Anne’s vision, Lies is not the object of the guilt at all. Consequently, the implication is that, despite his obvious devotion, the true object of his longing was not necessarily Chris all along, but instead some other deep rooted emotional or spiritual need, for which Chris was ultimately a ‘screen’.

The use of the extract from Anne Frank’s diary is also important in maintaining the trope of the persecuted Jew. The number of Old Testament allusions far exceeds those relating to the New Testament, indicating the extent to which his Christian conscience is expressed by means of this metaphorical spiritual association with Judaism. The notion of his struggle against ‘the Law’ is a very deliberate and carefully conceived correlative. The sequence, as it is reprinted in *Collected Poems*, concludes with an important Old Testament allusion in the form of the epilogue, ‘Judges xvi.22’. This was included on the original typescript from 1947, but was left out of *Berryman’s Sonnets* when they were eventually published in 1967.<sup>80</sup> Judges xvi.22 reads: ‘But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.’ Excluded from its scriptural context the epilogue works as a straightforward and optimistic metaphor for recovery, after the

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<sup>80</sup> Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p.314.

emotional blow he has received. However, the biblical context of the epilogue appears to confirm that it was also intended to reflect, and moreover, draw to a conclusion, the central religious trope of the sequence.

The epilogue is derived from the story of the Judge Samson and his experiences with the Philistines of Gaza. Samson falls in love with the Philistine Delilah, whom the Philistines consequently employ to try to obtain from Samson the secret of his remarkable strength. After much persistence Samson reveals his secret to Delilah; it is his hair, uncut since birth, that makes him powerful, since this is the sign that he is a Nazirite, a man consecrated to God. Delilah then has Samson's head shaved while he sleeps, enabling the Philistines easily to overpower him since 'the Lord had left him'. After binding him, and then gouging out his eyes, the Philistines use him for their amusement; they also offer sacrifices to their god Dagon in thanks for their deliverance from the Judge. But the hair on Samson's head begins to grow again and he prays to God for the strength to take revenge on the Philistines. Samson receives the strength to push in the pillars of the house, where everyone has gathered to make fun of him. Three thousand Philistines, including their leaders, are crushed to death by the falling building.<sup>81</sup>

Important thematic parallels are to be drawn from the story. A comparison is clearly being made between the relationship of Delilah and Samson, and that of Chris and the poet, which relates to the conflict between the two laws. Chris, who has been described so often in Pagan terms throughout the sonnets, is the woman of the Philistines; through becoming the object of the poet's love, she has tested his fidelity to God and to His Law. He has submitted to the lure of this woman, revealing his innermost secret being

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<sup>81</sup> Judges 16.

to her, but he now feels he has been betrayed. An act of misplaced trust has resulted in a separation from God, as when Samson lost his hair. He placed all his faith in Chris rather than God, to the point where she became his faith. The epilogue, however, represents the opportunity of reconciliation with God and the subsequent return of his 'power'. The poet's method of avenging the wrong done is to write, with power and inspiration supplied by God, and then possibly publish the sonnets. Hence, the epilogue represents God's victory, a victory of 'the Law' over 'our law', rather than the poet's own victory.

Since the epilogue appears so essential in resolving the conflict between the two laws, it is surprising that it was omitted from *Berryman's Sonnets*. Aside from the possibility that it was a simple oversight on the poet's part, one reason for this is that he considered the notion of reconciliation with God somewhat unpalatable at the time, as the portrayal of Henry's turbulent relationship with his Creator would suggest.<sup>82</sup> In contrast, the fact that Berryman was delighted by his sense of 'renewed togetherness' with his wife in the aftermath of the affair, suggests that he may have considered the apparent victory of 'the Law' in his life a reality.<sup>83</sup> The additional poems can also be seen at certain points to have had Judges 16 in mind. The assertion, for instance, in Sonnet 107 that 'he was in love and he was had' seems applicable to his identification with Samson's situation, as does the social gathering in Sonnet 117, which recalls the gathering of pagans to make fun of the suffering and betrayed Samson. The omission is also puzzling in view of the fact that the additional sonnets reinforce the religious allegory of the sequence's

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<sup>82</sup> The epilogue appears on a separate sheet with the original typescript (with handwritten corrections from 1947), and is not with the carbon copy (without the 1947 corrections) that Berryman amended before sending to the publisher in 1966. Charles Thornbury's theory, concerning the poet's choice of typescript, is that he chose the carbon-copy because at the time of publication he was too busy to make a clean copy of the hand-corrected version; he consequently chose the cleanest copy to hand, which was the carbon-copy, from which the epilogue page was missing. Berryman, *Collected Poems*. pp. 303-06.

<sup>83</sup> See Haffenden, *Life of John Berryman*, p.193.

narrative, reflecting the poet's increasing later preoccupation with Christian spirituality. The poet draws attention to this eschatological framework in Sonnet 116, reflecting on the 'cause of our story which led us up from Hell to Purgatory, / then again downwards'.

The over-riding omnipresent focus of the sonnets is of course Chris, or rather the poet's turbulent record of his all-consuming love for her. However, it is the identification of himself as an 'adulterer', and the emotional consequences of this identification, which comes to dominate the representation of the course of this love. The conflict of his conscience is represented by the sustained and developed religious metaphor of the struggle between the two faiths. However, the notion of 'the Law', which represents a manifestation of God—the disturbingly abstract source of his guilt—is identified as the opposing force in this conflict; the Law is the obstacle to any satisfaction achievable through the fulfilment of his own will. Berryman draws pertinently from scripture, mainly the Hebrew Bible, in the representation of this conflict. However, the meaning of life is beyond the remit of the sonnets; the poet makes no attempt at this point to investigate the nature of his apparent obstacle. In *The Dream Songs*, however, he turns his attention to the source of the guilt itself, and a critical examination of the scripture and faith on which it is based. From the point of view of his relationship with Christianity, therefore, the *Sonnets* represents above all a depiction of the personal inner conflict that he would come to externalise and depict so inventively in his major work. It is a foretaste of the battle to come.

## Chapter 3

**The Tempting of Saint Anne Bradstreet**

After *The Dream Songs*, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* is the work of Berryman's which has, since its publication, received the most critical attention and, indeed, praise. Critical readings of the poem are broadly divided into two camps, depending on the way in which the role of the poet's apparent subject, Anne Bradstreet, is viewed. There are those who regard *Homage* as being primarily concerned with the historical Anne Bradstreet, and, conversely, those who regard the Bradstreet character as a poetic device or authorial mask, with the real subject of the poem being the poet. The first type of reading—characterised, for instance, by the criticism of Alan Holder and Joel Connaroe—has now largely fallen out of favour.<sup>1</sup> Far too much attention has been drawn to Berryman's distortions and manipulations of historical fact. Haffenden has described the biographical background of the poem, demonstrating the way *Homage* depicts the 'emotional turmoil of the poet himself' in the aftermath of his first major affair and continuing marital infidelities.<sup>2</sup> Another consideration is the poem's thematic continuity with *Berryman's Sonnets* and later works, particularly with regard to the *Sonnets'* portrayal of the poet's moral and religious conflicts. This has been remarked on to a certain extent by J. M. Linebarger and Gary Q. Arpin, though not significantly developed, and more recently—mainly with regard to gender—by Luke Spencer.<sup>3</sup> Such positions characterise the second broad type of reading.

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Holder, 'Anne Bradstreet Resurrected', *Concerning Poetry* 2 (1969), 11-18; Connaroe, *John Berryman*, pp.69-83.

<sup>2</sup> Haffenden, *Critical Commentary*, pp.9-33.

<sup>3</sup> Linebarger, *John Berryman*, pp.68-76; Gary Q. Arpin, 'Mistress Bradstreet's Discontents', *John Berryman Studies*, 1.3 (1975), 2-7; Luke Spencer, 'Mistress Bradstreet and Mr. Berryman: The Ultimate Seduction', *American Literature*, 66.2 (1994), 353-66.

Berryman's own insistence—in his essay 'One Answer to a Question: Changes' (1965)—that *Homage* 'is a historical poem', despite its poetic licence, may have unduly influenced the earlier discussions and may even tempt one to reorient the critical debate because of it. However, his remarks in the same essay about the poem's composition point to a more useful source of critical emphasis. The poet notes how the writing of *Homage* stalled for a long time because 'although I had my form and subject, I did not have my theme yet. This emerged under the triple impetus of events I won't identify.'<sup>4</sup> As his comments seem to imply, the 'subject' of the poem—the historical character and life of Anne Bradstreet—is more appropriately to be seen as a vehicle for particular themes, and one urgently motivated by personal experience; it is a frame which gives outer shape and coherence to the real, more conceptual, focus of the work. It is my contention that the poem works successfully only if seen in this light, as a further and more developed representation of the spiritual and moral conflict portrayed in the *Sonnets*. Otherwise, one must ultimately brand the poem, as Stanley Kunitz does, 'a failure', albeit one that 'is worth more than most successes.'<sup>5</sup>

Kunitz's persuasive argument against the poem illustrates how the way in which one perceives the poetic device of Anne Bradstreet will profoundly influence the critical outcome. He is put off by what he regards as Berryman's hysterical overwriting, remarking that 'the display of so much exacerbated sensibility, psychic torment, religious ecstasy, seems to be intermittently in excess of what the secular occasion requires'. He regards the most serious lapse of taste to be the 'love-duet' of the middle section which 'tends to collapse into a bathos somewhat reminiscent of Crashaw's

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<sup>4</sup> Berryman, 'One Answer to a Question: Changes', *Freedom of the Poet*, pp.327-29.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Kunitz, 'No Middle Flight: Berryman's *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*', in *Berryman's Understanding*, pp.110-16 (p.110) (first publ. in *Poetry* 90 (1957) 244-49).

extravagant compounding of religion and sex'.<sup>6</sup> John Frederick Nims too regards *Homage* as a 'gallant failure' for the same reasons; aside from what he calls the 'god-awful jawbreaking blether' of much of the poem's language, what he most objects to is 'the fable—so strained that any summary of it sounds like burlesque. And this is largely because it runs counter to common sense.' Although Nims recognises that the poem is in fact more about the poet himself, he argues that the mythical Bradstreet is too incredible a candidate to play the role the poet requires of her. He 'cannot help wondering about the nature of Mistress Bradstreet's attraction for the poet', because it appears so incongruous with the nature of the real woman; also, there is the apparent absurdity of the 'poet's' sexual frenzy over the woman whom he simultaneously depicts as being so physically, as well as poetically, undesirable.<sup>7</sup>

The position of these critics highlights two common misconceptions about the poem's focus, which will inevitably lead to such criticisms of its style. Firstly, the principal concern of *Homage* is not any form of 'secular occasion', but a profound religious dilemma; the whole drama of the poem rests on whether or not Anne will persevere in her Christian faith against the threat of suffering, and the temptations to selfhood and worldliness embodied by 'the poet'. The sustained intensity of the language is entirely appropriate in portraying the speaker's belief that the fate of her soul hangs in the balance; throughout, she is confronted with situations that test her faith, and could potentially result in her damnation. Conversely, she must also experience the sorrowful dilemma of whether or not to reject potential sources of happiness in this world, for a reward in the next that she cannot be certain will ever come. However, whether or not

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp.112.

<sup>7</sup> John Frederick Nims, 'Screwing Up the Theorbo: *Homage* in Measure to Mr Berryman', in *Berryman's Understanding*, pp.117-26.

Berryman is successful in working this intensity into the language of the poem is a different matter.

Secondly, there is the insurmountable problem of credibility encountered when one regards Anne and the 'poet' as two distinct agents. If one interprets the poem as a romantic encounter between the 'seventeenth century woman and the twentieth century poet'—as Berryman himself loosely referred to it—then the concept does indeed place impossible demands on the reader's common sense, even if it takes place in the realm of fantasy. One has to believe that the 'poet's' desire for such a tryst with his perceived kindred spirit is so overpowering that his imagination vividly conjures up her being. Naturally, however, it is implausible that the modern poet would feel such desperate longing for this pock-marked Puritan, this creator of 'bald didactic rime', whom he scorns, in the poem, for her feeble poetry and her simple faith. Berryman's own justification for his subject is that he was interested in her 'as a woman', and that he felt a certain affinity with her because they both write 'high verse' in a land which is indifferent to it.<sup>8</sup> However, whereas this sort of affinity might inspire admiration, it is unlikely to inspire the kind of unbridled passion the 'poet' exhibits in *Homage*. With these factors in mind, the motives of the 'poet' appear more sinister, with the aim of corrupting and disrupting Anne's choice of life.

Furthermore, Berryman takes liberties with the historical Bradstreet to the extent that much of the poem becomes an act of poetic ventriloquism. The poet himself recognised that—given Bradstreet's apparent strength of character, and her devotion to her faith and family—her interest in him would be implausible, so he located the tryst in the realm of self-conscious fantasy. The problem he identified was how 'to make the

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<sup>8</sup> Berryman, 'One Answer', *Freedom of the Poet*, p.328.

fantasy believable'; he added 'some people think I have completely failed with that'.<sup>9</sup> He does not engage with the spirit of Bradstreet's poetry or other writings, which, despite his disparaging opinion of the work, are the most faithful and personal evidence we have of the attitudes of the real woman. Berryman transforms her into a character of his creation, and, in this sense, he is successful. He makes her human and fallible: loving, wavering, vain, lustful, faithful, dutiful and rebellious. *Homage* is no hagiography, but a dramatised account of a spiritual trial in the vein of two of Berryman's favourite religious classics: *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself* and Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. Taking such models of the lives of these saints, *Homage* portrays a Christian who ultimately overcomes the stranglehold of sin and retains her faith, despite the temptations and suffering she endures. Bradstreet represents belief in a God who is fundamentally merciful and just, and a conception of human suffering which has a purpose. It is a vision which contrasts radically with that represented by Henry in *The Dream Songs*.

The two characters of *Homage* are representative of distinct world views and life choices. The poem partly takes its concept from the didactic dialogue verse of the real Anne Bradstreet, as epitomised in her poem 'The Flesh and the Spirit'.<sup>10</sup> However, Berryman's versions of the 'flesh' and the 'spirit'—the 'poet' and his construction of Anne respectively—are more complex and evolving. Their positions are stratified by their insecurities and uncertainties; nevertheless, their overall roles are clear. Of the two, it would seem that the character of the poet becomes subsumed into that of Anne Bradstreet, and he becomes more of an evanescent presence than a character. This is an irony highlighted by Haffenden, who notes that 'she is substantiated in order that Berryman may introduce himself almost as a projection of her fantasy'; conversely,

<sup>9</sup> Stitt, 'An Interview with John Berryman', *Berryman's Understanding*, p.34.

<sup>10</sup> *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, ed. by Jeannine Hensley (London: Belknap, 1967), pp.215-18.

Bradstreet is 'the type of Berryman's desubstantiated self. His breath is mixed with her agony and consolation'.<sup>11</sup>

This symbiotic relationship stands for a conflict of individual conscience. The 'poet' becomes the externalised voice of Bradstreet's concupiscence; he is the tempter, who will manifest himself as an embodiment of evil, a dark angel, in the course of the poem. Yet he is a more complex character than a plot summary might suggest: he is at times egotistical, sentimental, insecure, opportunistic, jealous, spiteful, lustful, affectionate and attention-seeking. As the ample self-loathing of *Sonnets* attests, Berryman was not sympathetic to the side of his nature which pursues adulterous liaisons, even if motivated by 'love'. Haffenden has noted how Anne Bradstreet, as a wife and mother, embodies the nature of the women whom the poet pursued in real life; as well as, in the first half of the poem, fulfilling the role of 'the childless wife'.<sup>12</sup> In addition, she represents his Christian conscience: the side of him which was pulled by the force of 'the Law' in *Sonnets*. Bradstreet embodies this aspect of his conscience in a more active sense than was depicted in the *Sonnets*; it is the choice of life which is being threatened by sinister designs from outside, rather than constituting a threat in itself. The same battle of wills is there, but it is the route which ultimately gives meaning to her suffering, offering a redemptive conclusion, and which appears to triumph; whereas the poet, rejected, is left to subsist in a world which is dying.

It should be noted too that Berryman's Bradstreet also represents a more Catholicised version of the historical figure. To the extent that he assimilates into *Homage* her authentic attitudes and some phrases from her writings, he chooses to overlook a typical element of her work; that is, her Puritan diatribes against 'papism'. Hostility towards the

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<sup>11</sup> Haffenden, *Critical Commentary*, pp.11, 32.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, pp.32-33.

‘popish religion’ is an integral part of her sense of religious identity, as demonstrated. for instance, in ‘To My Dear Children’ and ‘A Dialogue between Old England and New’.<sup>13</sup> The Bradstreet of *Homage* welcomes a purgatory on earth; she also views her justification through faith as being contingent on her works, which she realises, at the poem’s moral climax, need to be inspired by God’s grace. The whole tenor of the poem is fraught with the anxiety that it is she, rather than God, who will ultimately choose her eternal fate; the notion of election does not form part of her religious outlook. The nature of the religious angst therefore is more characteristic of Berryman’s personality, as expressed in his poetry, rather than Bradstreet’s. Berryman’s Anne represents the Catholic wife to whom he was unfaithful in his own life. She also represents a kind of Virgin Mary figure, who ultimately sacrifices her own worldly ambitions and desires to fulfil God’s will, as dutiful wife and mother, through marriage to a man whom her father chose for her. In stanza 14, her acceptance of Simon’s proposal—‘their will be done’, an allusion to the Lord’s Prayer—pointedly echoes that of Mary on receiving the declaration of the angel Gabriel.<sup>14</sup>

Whereas the biographical background may be incidental to a reading of *Homage*, the religious dilemma is one that is clearly played out through the roles of the two major players in the poem. The ‘poet’ is deceptively subtle as a satanic figure. His attempt at seduction appears insincere. He wants to disrupt Anne’s attachment to her faith and family; not just, or rather not even, out of genuine desire for Anne, but more out of rebelliousness towards God, or as an expression of the scepticism he voices in stanza

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<sup>13</sup> In ‘To My Dear Children’ she reflects: ‘Why may not the Popish religion be the right? They have the same God, the same Christ, the same word. They only interpret it one way, we another. This hath sometimes stuck with me, and more it would, but the vain fooleries that are in their religion together with their lying miracles and cruel persecutions of the saints, which admit were they as they term them. yet not so to be dealt withal. The consideration of these things and many the like would soon turn me to my own religion again’. See also ‘A Dialogue between Old England and New’, in which both speakers express their vitriol against Rome. *Anne Bradstreet*, pp.179-88, 244.

<sup>14</sup> Lk 1.38.

35. He sets up the object of his tryst, plucked from the obscurity of history, as an example of someone who tried to lead a Godly life, in order to expose her to temptation and make her fall. The four stanzas of the poem's exordium demonstrate an ambivalent, subtly manipulative, approach to the object of his supposed desire. The opening portrays the voice of the 'poet' as both taunting and affectionate:

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. (1.1-8)

On the one hand, he appears to try to converse with her in the spirit of marital devotion and Christian faith, inquiring as to whether she ever felt impatient towards her husband. On the other hand, there is a degree of provocation here; he is tempting her from the outset into an adulterous liaison by reminding her of Simon's frequent absences. He is sowing suspicion and discord, isolating and inspiring her dissatisfaction. The last word, 'still', of the second line becomes an example of this manipulative ambivalence, since it functions as both a postpositional exacerbation of her wait, and—separated by the stanza's lineation from the rest of its clause—an expression meaning 'in spite of this'. The word introduces a similar disingenuousness into line four; the speaker perceives her in the stillness of arrested time, and, also, implies that she is wilfully pausing before the gaze of his imagination.

The image he conjures is of the Christian family, and a woman burning 'bright eyes' with faith as she absorbs the works of Joshua Sylvester (1561-1618) and Francis Quarles (1592-1644), 'her favourite poets; unfortunately', as Berryman remarks in his

endnotes.<sup>15</sup> The ‘poet’ displays an affectionately jealous and contemptuous desire for the faith and family life which Anne possesses. He does indeed appear ‘unhanded’ (2.8), like a lost soul scouring the ages for rebellious mischief, which takes the form of attention seeking. He is ‘unchained eager far & wild’ (25.8), a figure whom Anne appears deeply suspicious of; she recognises him as a predator of the soul, one who ‘leaguers’ her. He hovers over the course of her life, waiting for a moment to lure her.

His main intervention, culminating in the seduction scene, comes when Anne is at her most vulnerable, experiencing a kind of post-natal depression in which she feels ‘at a loss, / freer’ (22.4-5), and begins to drift into temptation. Her life and environment appears to her insufferably dour; the harsh realities and trials of life, with its illnesses, deaths and sufferings, afflict her and the community; she loses faith in the community’s religious project as factionalism and pedantic doctrinal disputes begin to tear apart the community and sour the pilgrims’ dream of the New Jerusalem.

The ‘poet’ becomes the ultimate flatterer—‘if, O my love, my heart is breaking, please / neglect my cries and I will spare you’—and his overkill seduction technique works, such that he even seems to convince himself (25.8-26.4). Anne is initially suspicious of the ‘poet’; he cannot possibly desire her in that way, and he does not. She reminds him that he is surely desirous of a physical beauty which she no longer possesses since the ‘pox blasted’ (14.2, 26.4-7). Bradstreet actually made a full recovery from the smallpox she suffered as a sixteen-year-old, and was not badly scarred, but Berryman determines so to exacerbate her predicament.<sup>16</sup> The effect is to heighten the sense of both God’s

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<sup>15</sup> Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p.147.

<sup>16</sup> In her epistolary memoir, ‘To My Dear Children’ (1867), Bradstreet writes: ‘About 16, the Lord laid His hand sore upon me and smote me with the smallpox. When I was in my affliction, I besought the Lord and confessed my pride and vanity, and He was entreated of me and again restored me. But I rendered not to Him according to the benefit received.’

cruelty and his mercy, and to make the 'poet's' motives in the seduction more obviously non-amorous.

The character of Anne Bradstreet herself recognises what a number of critics, such as Kunitz and Nims, have criticised the poem for; that is, the absurdity of the 'poet's' lust for this Puritan with a ravaged face.<sup>17</sup> Yet her human fallibility and vanity begin to overtake her reason: 'You must not love me, but I do not bid you cease' (26.8). The tension introduced here between submission and restraint is played out in an intense dramatic episode over the fifteen stanzas of her central encounter with the poet. Anne's thoughts become increasingly carnal; she feels 'wicked', though uneasily so, as the 'shake' and 'retch' of her morning anxiety accompanies the invigorating new world of passionate love which is now rapidly revealing itself to her. At this point, the 'poet' declares a certain victory from his seduction and seeks a consummation of the tryst:

—I have earned the right to be alone with you.  
 —What right can that be?  
 Convulsing, if you love, enough, like a sweet lie.

Not that, I know, you can. This cratered skin,  
 like the crabs & shells of my Palissy ewer, touch! (27.6-28.2)

Bradstreet again expresses her scepticism in justified self-deprecation; she herself begins taunting and goading the poet, asking why, if he really does desire her, he is 'convulsing' as the sight of her 'cratered skin', which she likens to the feel of her 'Palissy ewer', an evocative simile incorporating period detail. The French master potter Bernard Palissey (1510-90), and his followers, produced earthenware vessels decorated with castings of small animal and plant life—such as 'crabs' and 'shells'—

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<sup>17</sup> See Kunitz, 'No Middle Flight', *Berryman's Understanding*, pp.112-13; Nims, 'Screwing Up the Theorbo', *Berryman's Understanding*, pp.119-22.

and various other sculptured effects. A 'ewer' is a large jug, usually accompanied by a matching basin, which would mostly have been used for the purposes of hand-washing.

Bradstreet realises—again, something that most of the poem's critics have not—that the 'poet' is not expressing true desire or love for her, but rather a fundamental wickedness of intent. Her disbelief that the 'poet' could feel amorous towards her, arouses the suspicion that he is trying to corrupt her for the sake of corrupting her, to destroy what she represents and the domestic family set-up she has now that her first child has been born. The 'poet' has already subtly sowed marital dissatisfaction in her mind during the exordium, and poured scorn on the 'shamefast, chaste, laborious, [and] odd' personality expressed through her verse (13.1). He wants to destroy the nuclear Christian family, which, as suggested in stanza 14, Anne had accepted as God's will. Anne, like the Virgin Mary, with whom Berryman associated Bradstreet, has also become the model of traditional Christian womanhood, for she has acquiesced in the will of her husband and her God.

The act of seduction by the 'poet' is therefore a direct attempt to undermine God's will and plan. The story of Job is fundamental to the poem, just as it was to the historical Bradstreet's conception of her suffering in her poetry.<sup>18</sup> The 'poet' takes the role of Satan, who has been granted access to test God's servant in his duel with Him. Fundamentally, the poem constitutes a contest between the 'poet' and God, with Anne Bradstreet becoming the focus and object of it; since, on the outside, she appears to be the model of Christian virtue.

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, see 'Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House, July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1666', *Anne Bradstreet*, pp.292-93.

As the poet makes his final move, and touches her, Anne panics, and the clauses become more highly distorted, representing the semantic nightmare she is experiencing:

Oh, you do, you do?  
 Falls on me what I like a witch,  
 for lawless holds, annihilations of law  
 which Time and he and man abhor, foresaw. (28.3-6)

She is taken back by the fact that he does dare to touch her, despite her ‘cratered skin’, and—knowing at that moment that she does not possess sufficient will to resist—realises that this is the fall, followed by the chastisement, which inevitably must come, and which she ‘like a witch [...] foresaw’. Now she allows lawlessness to take hold in what, as Linebarger points out, is one of the most significant passages of the poem, suggesting as it does—in continuity with the *Sonnets*—the conflict between ‘the Law’ and the self-law, and the perceived consequences of rejecting the former.<sup>19</sup> In this way, the narrative attempts to depict the workings of conscience. The ‘poet’s’ touch brings the moment of decision to the instant; she must now truly make the option for or against God. The consequences that will be meted out to her by her ‘Friend’, for the sake of this transgression, rush before her conscience in a deliberation of awful intensity:

sharper than what my Friend  
 brought me for my revolt when I moved smooth & thin,

faintings black, rigour, chilling, brown  
 parching, back, brain burning, the grey pocks  
 itch, a manic stench  
 of pustules snapping, pain floods the palm,  
 sleepless, or a red shaft with a dreadful start  
 rides at the chapel, like a slipping heart.  
 My soul strains in one qualm  
 ah but *this* is not to save me but to throw me down.

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<sup>19</sup> Linebarger, *John Berryman*, p.73.

And out of this I lull. It lessons. Kiss me. (28.7-30.1)

Identifying God as her ‘Friend’—the One who mercifully still made a spouse of Anne after chastising her with disfigurement—exacerbates the sense of betrayal, and God’s awful power and cruel mercy are conveyed by the sheer relentlessness of the physical torments afflicted on her, as she piles up the recollected scourge of smallpox. It is a sudden contrast to the image of the sensuous feline sexuality of the young Bradstreet (at fourteen years), an abrupt jolt to her carefree youth as the disease rapidly takes grip. The course of her torment follows that of the process of the illness: a high fever, fatigue, and head and back aches, followed by a rash of red lesions which become pus filled, before eventually scabbing over. The poet devotes the stanza to an intense recollection of the disease in all its deep unpleasantness, since Anne is now contemplating a chastisement far worse, in her maturity, than when she was an adolescent. She wrestles with this disturbing ‘qualm’, torn between the embracing and forsaking of sinful passion, with a view to the consequences she fears will be inflicted by her ‘Friend’, the Almighty. In a sudden outburst of rebellion, however, the speaker lashes out from the compressed tetrametered line of moral squirming, into the defiance of the effusive alexandrine, emphatically denouncing the ways of His ‘Mystery’; she perceives in this instant His oppression, rather than His mercy.

Whereas she accepted her adolescent chastisement as a mode of moral schooling, in order to save her soul, she is sure ‘*this*’ is God attempting to oppress her, and prevent her happiness. Like Eve tempted by the serpent, Anne has allowed the ‘poet’ to come between her and God to the point where her concupiscence persuades her that God is a tyrant, opposed to her finding fulfilment and becoming like Him. Hence, Berryman recreates the classic scenario of the Fall: she has raised herself in mutiny against God.

The Lord, and the threat of His Law, have been ousted for the time being from her conscience. Having battered down the scruple, it recedes, and she experiences the 'lull' of freedom, the peace of mind wherein she can allow the encounter with the 'poet' to proceed.

Responding to Anne's encouragement—'Talk to me' (30.8)—the seduction ensues in stanza 31, with the 'poet' beguiling her with his verse, and the exchanges become more mutually passionate. But insecurities and ambivalences begin to be exposed in both parties, and the dialogue becomes a more erratic emotional exchange. A complex interplay of feelings, both within and between themselves, is depicted in the stanzas which follow, as both characters are made to confront themselves as well as each other. In stanza 33, with Anne now reciprocating his advances, the 'poet' feels himself losing control of the situation; as Berryman's notes inform us, he is disturbingly euphoric, like a diver with 'délires des grandes profondeurs', who fatally attempts to offer passing fish his oxygen supply.<sup>20</sup> He is moved to frenzied excitement by the prospect of the seduction's consummation, but also unsettled by the extent of this transgression; envisaging her as a Byzantine icon of the Virgin, he cries to this image (rather pompously) to 'refrain my Western Lust'. His insecurity is now exposed, like the delirious diver, making him vulnerable to the spiritual advancements of Anne, who responds to the 'poet's' expressions of self-repugnance with sympathy. Her motherly qualities sway him to seek pity and affection, something he desires as much from a lover as the fulfilment of his lust.

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<sup>20</sup> Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p.148.

As if taken back by the virtuous Anne's kindled desire for him, he tests the resolve of her sin. Unsettled also by the extent of his own transgression, he appears to backtrack, attempting to turn her away from him with a self-exposure of his evil in stanza 34. Like the image of a sadistic Satan, trundling the bodies over the fire, he reveals how he uses women for his own carnal ends: he holds himself accountable for their spiritual deaths. Like Jocasta reassuring Oedipus that such evil is only within the province of his dreams, Anne, moved by her affection for him, will not accept the 'poet's' baseness.<sup>21</sup> Anne desires the poet, but on her own terms, which are still to some extent God's terms. She optimistically believes that she and the poet can be together, in communion with God, and, if they remain virtuous, their relationship will be welcomed by him: 'In green space we are safe. / God awaits us (but I am yielding) who Hell wars' (34.7-8). 'Green' represents 'innocence' in this context, and as long as they resist Hell's temptations, they will be reunited with God.<sup>22</sup> Anne's parenthesised remarks add an unnecessary overstretching of the point since she has already 'yielded' to temptation; but her enthusiastic plea to the 'poet's' goodness is a necessary element, Anne being carried away by the reflex action of her fundamentally Christian nature.

The poet responds with scepticism and violently reacts against Anne's sympathetic counsel in a stanza that represents the climax of the ethereal encounter:

—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. (36.1-8)

<sup>21</sup> Linebarger, *John Berryman*, p.73.

<sup>22</sup> As in Jesus's saying: 'For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?' (Lk 23.31). In other words, if an innocent man is treated so badly, what will they do to the guilty?

The ‘poet’ disputes the notion of God in which Berryman will much later affirm his absolute belief; that is, the ‘God of Rescue’. The third and fourth lines cited appear to be so significant to Berryman that he devotes one of the largest clarifications in his notes to this point, despite its apparent simplicity. To illustrate the helplessness of humanity, he presents us with the image of the movie serial cliff-hanger, in which the hero or heroine is left dangling in some terrifying plight; the implication being that the audience trusts they will be saved, however implausibly, the following week. No such rescue he trusts will be performed by God, who either leaves sinful humanity to its fate and does not mercifully intervene to help sinners, or, at least, redeems only the righteous; at worst, He does not exist. Berryman even feels the need to define exactly what ‘rescue’ is intended to imply here: ‘forcible recovery (by the owner) of goods distrained’; God will not come to claim back those souls that have abused their gifted lives, nor save those led astray by the malice of others.<sup>23</sup> God will not save the poet, nor will He save Anne from the poet; and with this notion the ‘poet’ makes his final move in his bid to ravish the heroine’s soul.

His scepticism, however, is in itself uncertain, and he feels the need to qualify his expression of it (‘may be’). Despite his efforts he cannot reconcile himself to himself; he cannot be his own friend, and in frustration plunges violently ahead with his original designs, ripping open Anne’s simple smock, and imagining a wound in her chest which exposes her heart. The following stanza again depicts Anne succumbing to temptation—‘Shame / is failing. My breath is scented, and I throw / hostile glances towards God’ (36.1-3)—but once more Berryman overstretches the drama, since this is a repeat of the moment in which Anne is awakened to a sensuality whose resistance has

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<sup>23</sup> Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p.148.

already been overcome (29.4-30.1); however, it can be said to represent the oscillation of conscience in the face of temptation, even though some dramatic intensity is lost.

Although the encounter takes place in the realm of febrile fantasy, to Anne, with her devoutly Christian sensibilities, committing adultery in thought is as sinful as committing it in deed. Therefore the intense language of the final climactic stanzas of her seduction is couched in innuendo which renders the action ambiguous, giving the impression that coitus actually occurs. Such innuendo also exposes the 'poet's' desire to violate Anne, which underlies his romantic overtures; and, in a coarse pun, the spreading of her revealed 'gash' allows the 'poet' to metaphorically enter her (35.6-8).<sup>24</sup> The image of phallic domination, being pounded by the 'pestle', and the 'poet's' penetration, as it 'reaches foul', is one that threatens the now fragile kernel of spirituality inside her, the 'minute tangle of eternal flame' (36.4-8). The next two stanzas sustain the black intensity of a conscience that is aware it is now in grave mortal sin, but Anne's soul still oscillates between a sense of rebellious, carnal euphoria and the frightening prospect of eternal loss: 'I fear Hell's hammer-wind. But fear does wane [...] A black joy clashes / joy, in twilight' (37.1-4).

She disputes the traditional notion of Eve being Satan's duped accomplice in the corruption of man; in this case, Satan has used man as his instrument to crush female virtue, represented by the apocalyptic image of 'small women swarming towards the mortar's rim in vain' as a 'male great pestle' smashes them.<sup>25</sup> By this time the 'poet', as

<sup>24</sup> Berryman's use of this coarse slang in his poetry is not uncharacteristic. In 'Her & It', from *Love & Fame*, for instance, he declares: 'I fell in love with a girl / O and a gash.' *Collected Poems*, p.169.

<sup>25</sup> The depiction of Anne's spiritual battle in Stanzas 36 to 38 may have been partly influenced by the following passage from Bradstreet's 'To My Dear Children', particularly in view of the crushing-pestle image both employ: 'I have thought if the Lord would but lift up the light of his countenance upon me, although He ground me to powder, it would be but light to me: yea, oft have I thought were I in hell itself and could there find the love of God toward me, it would be a heaven.' *Anne Bradstreet*, p.243.

we have known him in the poem up to now, no longer appears present; he has been transfigured before Anne, at the moment of her transgression, into an image of evil; it is as if Hell has opened out before her. Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan' echoes through stanza 38, evoking its darkly disturbing image of annunciation in the form of sexual violation. with the 'cruel spread Wings black with saints' and 'horror, down stormy air' which 'warps towards' her (38.1,7-8). But Anne starts to rebel against the dark satanic force, realising that she has rejected one form of perceived tyranny, only to embrace another:

Silky my breasts not his, mine, mine, to withhold  
 or tender, tender.  
 I am sifting, nervous, and bold.  
 The light is changing. Surrender this loveliness  
 you cannot make me do. *But* I will. Yes.  
 What horror, down stormy air,  
 warps towards me? My threatening promise faints—  
 torture me, Father, lest not I be thine! (38.2-39.1)

This represents the turning point of the poem. Anne emphatically claims back her body, which she had virtually relinquished to lust; the backlash of conscience has now forced her will to assert itself. She becomes increasingly empowered, but not enough to overcome Satan's grip altogether; her will is 'sifting', and the line depicting her final attempt at self-resistance—'you cannot make me do. *But* I will. Yes'—positively strains under the tension of her exertion. Throughout the stanza the speaker's utterances alternate between effusive outbursts and squirmings of sick conscience.

But then in a final tumultuous outburst she implores intervention from the God of Rescue whom the 'poet', or Satan, denied. She realises that it is impossible to overcome temptation and sin by her own efforts; it is only achievable through grace. She now pleads for the same tortuous physical afflictions which she had formerly viewed as

evidence of God's tyranny; she has now gone back to viewing such affliction as a merciful chastisement. In an instant 'Christ drives abroad' the demonic 'faces half-fanged', she feels 'evil dissolve', and the sound of her children and the bustle of her domestic duties becomes her preoccupation (39.4-6). The speaker becomes immersed again in her own world and we hear no more of the 'poet' until Anne dies.

What is convincing and effective about the tryst is that it is intense and brief; after it, Bradstreet seems to mature and the 'poet' becomes an irrelevant Lothario left on the sidelines of her life. We are most involved with Anne once the 'poet' is out of the picture and she is left with the serious business of the hardships and challenges thrown at her by daily life and by God. This too, ironically, is where the poem becomes most engaged with the real Bradstreet, whose faith, like Job's, survives the afflictions sent to test her. For the rest of the poem Anne becomes the epitome of Christian virtue, fulfilling her domestic duties as mother and wife with good grace, giving counsel to her children, and bearing her trials because she perceives them as God's merciful will. This is the Anne who is recognisable from her poetry, although Berryman has Bradstreet—quite out of character—disparaging her own verse as a tedious irrelevance, remarking how 'the proportioned, spiritless poems accumulate' (42.6). Berryman is not especially interested in her verse, except that it provides contextual material with which to depict her spiritual development and attitudes.

Stanza 43 gave Berryman particular pleasure in the writing, as he recalls in 'One Answer to a Question: Changes': 'the third pleasant moment [of the poem's composition] I remember is when one night, hugging myself, I decided that her fierce

dogmatic old father was going to die blaspheming, in delirium.<sup>26</sup> Aside from undermining, to a certain extent, his assertion in the same essay that *Homage* 'is a historical poem', there are important reasons for the inclusion of this scene, beyond that of acute Schadenfreude. The image of the raving, blaspheming death of Anne's father serves as a dramatic device. It provides a vision of the fate which could have been Anne's, had she not implored the intervention of God's grace. It emphasises the vulnerability of even the most solid faith, and provides a dramatic comparison with Anne's own spiritual victory, as well as reminding the reader that the spiritual battle is not over yet. It also appears to be a form of consolation prize for the Devil; having failed in his bid to claim the soul of the young woman, he can at least take that of the 'dogmatic old father', whom Berryman clearly took a dislike to. Anne, by contrast, pleads for him the same mercy she has previously experienced, despite her transgressions: 'Save, / Lord, thy servant zealous & just' (43.3-4).

Following the death of her father, Anne is again reminded of mortality and the frailty of the human spirit, and pleads: 'finish, Lord, in me this work thou hast begun' (44.8). The rest of the poem does indeed appear like the epitome of her good life's work, with her children growing up and fulfilling their own vocations in various walks of life. Anne also now believes her trials will be for her ultimate good, and, through her, for the good of others, and the remainder of the poem is taken up with the course of her deteriorating health, with spiritually formative highpoints along the way. Having now assented to God, Anne longs for death:

Let me die.

Body a-drain, when will you be dry  
and countenance my speed  
to Heaven's springs? lest stricter writhings have me declined. (47.5-8)

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<sup>26</sup> Berryman, 'One Answer', *Freedom of the Poet*, p.329.

She expresses the fear that further torment may threaten a repeat of spiritual, as well as physical, 'decline'. Misfortunes now become spiritual tests from which she emerges strengthened. Stanza 49 depicts her reaction to the destruction of her house by fire (an authentic experience which the real Bradstreet describes in 'Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House, July 10th, 1666'):

I sniff a fire burning without outlet,  
 consuming acrid its own smoke. It's me.  
 Ruined laughter sounds  
 outside. Ah but I waken, free.  
 And so I am about again. I hagged  
 a fury at the short maid, whom tongues tagged,  
 and I am sorry. Once  
 less I was anxious when more passioned to upset

the mansion & the garden & the beauty of God.  
 Insectile unreflective busyness  
 blunts & does amend. (49.1-50.3)

The burning down of her house constitutes another spiritual trial, a purification in which the fire becomes internalised. In Bradstreet's own depiction of the experience, the sorrow of losing her prized worldly possessions, gives way to a more profound realisation: 'Then straight I 'gin my heart to chide, / And did thy wealth on earth abide?' Like Job, Bradstreet 'blest His name that gave and took', is grateful for what the Lord has left her with, and turns her attention instead to the infinitely more glorious abode that will be waiting for her above.<sup>27</sup> Berryman's Bradstreet also considers this misfortune an ultimately liberating experience; she has 'waken[ed], free'. She feels guilty for being angry with the maid who is believed to have been responsible for the fire, and remarks how she was less upset in her days of sinful lust, when she sought to spoil the kingdom of God. She assuages her sorrow by preoccupying herself with her domestic duties.

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<sup>27</sup> *Anne Bradstreet*, pp.292-93.

The final strokes of the Lord's rod start in stanza 51 with the infirmity of old age, from which she forces herself to 'bear to look'. She suffers the dropsy and the death of several of her children, before finally giving up her ghost in a poignant moment which is necessarily oblique, for she moves on 'unfit, desirous, glad' to a destination that is beyond the realms of the 'poet's' knowledge or understanding (53.5-8). He cannot see more than the darkness which envelopes her world and the oblivion that characterises the passing of time. In this confrontation between spirit and flesh, the former departs to a world the latter cannot know or understand. The 'poet', as flesh, lives on in the world; he searches across Time, but never beyond it. A crucial ambiguity concludes the poem, since the 'poet' cannot be certain whether the faith for which Anne forsook him was justified. The 'poet's' realm is the material world and he regards the abode of the dead as one of cosmic awfulness—'their world must reel / speechless, blind in the end / about its chilling star' (55.2-4)—and he perceives Anne as returning to this world which, revolving as it is around a failing star, is also dying. Being one who 'cannot feel [...] God waits', and whom Anne came to regard as evil personified, the 'poet' perceives her materially joining a universe in the course of perpetual death. Anne feeds the processes of the earth. The 'poet' is also conscious of his share in this process; he is himself a 'closet of secrets dying' (55.6).

His closing address in the final two stanzas is reverently yearning in tone, as the image of Anne and her world fade before him. He is unrepentant about his actions—'I renounce not even ragged glances, small teeth, nothing'—and ends with a paean to the power of the imagination, which also resembles an elegy to its limitations. All the ages may be subject to his search, for answers, fulfilment and love, as he builds the concept

of the self which he is; but all, like Anne, can only return to him a 'lie', for such truths are irrecoverable. But 'love' still leaves him this flight of the imagination to traverse the boundaries of time; the repetition of 'still', as in the first stanza, emphasises the constancy of the imagination and its ability to transcend time. But love has no direct object here; it is a longing which cannot be fulfilled; and this apotheosis of her hovers before him, 'a sourcing', an unquenchable flame, which he 'like the firefly loves'.

The poem, as Berryman ultimately realised it, is much more than a biographical, or even autobiographical, project; its true subject, as I have tried to argue, is a trial of religious faith. The poet's 'sourcing' of Anne Bradstreet was motivated by her embodiment of a choice of life; she represents an arduous life in the Spirit, one that chooses to resist the world and its temptations, but one that is in the end, with God's grace, shown to be triumphant. As the poet's 'desubstantiated self' therefore, she holds out a possible resolution to the dilemmas of conscience represented by the early poetry and the *Sonnets*. However, the conclusion of *Homage* also depicts a fundamental uncertainty, for one does not know whether Bradstreet meets her reward in heaven, or, indeed, whether there is a life for her beyond the mortal world. It is a question the poet must take with him into his next major composition, *The Dream Songs*.