

«NIGHTMARES OF EDEN:»  
JOHN BERRYMAN'S  
*HOMAGE TO MISTRESS BRADSTREET*

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«My harpsichord weird as a koto drums / *adagio* for twilight,» John Berryman wrote in the closing and title-poem of his first book-length collection *The Dispossessed* (1948).<sup>1</sup> The image describes the stylistic or formal departures heralded by the book's later poems as well as Berryman's sense of a contemporary American cultural *Götterdämmerung*, symbolised by what he termed a pervasive «American *pleonexia*» in his unfinished and unpublished essay «The American Intellectual and the American Dream.»<sup>2</sup> What he called the «sluggish influence» of the Cold War in a *Partisan*

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<sup>1</sup> John Berryman, «The Dispossessed,» *Collected Poems 1937-1971*, 66. All subsequent quotations from Berryman's poetry are from this edition and will be given in parentheses following the abbreviation *CP*. In addition, references to Berryman's *The Freedom of the Poet* and *Stephen Crane* in this essay will be given in parentheses following the abbreviations *FP* and *SC* respectively.

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Barbara Bezat, Richard J. Kelly, and Alan K. Lathrop at the University of Minnesota for their assistance in working with the unpublished Berryman materials that are quoted in this essay. Permission to use those materials has been granted by Kate Donahue Berryman, whose generous interest in Berryman studies is a godsend to all scholars in the field. Earlier drafts of this essay were read by Duncan Doppelmann and Eric Haralson, whose input I acknowledge, as well as the comments of Kit Fryatt, whose assistance has been vital throughout the writing of this piece.

<sup>2</sup> This unfinished essay is dated «17 Nov[ember] [19]47» and consists of three and a half single-spaced typed pages with pencil annotations. Pencilled notes on the typescript suggest that the piece was intended to be used as the opening essay in a longer study, never realised, to be called *The American Intellectual*. In his preliminary notes Berryman indicates that the piece was written in part as a response to Mary McCarthy's essay «America the Beautiful: The Humanist in the Bathub,» which appeared in the September 1947 issue of *Commentary*. From his notes it can also be seen that Berryman planned to show the essay to the critics Dwight and Nancy Macdonald before publishing it. It was neither published nor revised for publication, however, for reasons that must

*Review* symposium in 1948 gradually became recognized by Berryman as a seemingly permanent condition of American culture, and in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, first published in *The Partisan Review* in 1953 and reprinted with illustrations by Ben Shahn in a Farrar, Straus and Cudahy edition in 1956, the poet's uncertain feelings about contemporary American culture and its future were translated into «nightmares of Eden» (CP 141). This essay explores neglected aspects of that process of translation and, contrary to the general tendency in Berryman criticism, reads his breakthrough «colonial poem» (Kelly 243) as a text that trenchantly interrogates the American self.

In early April 1948, just before the publication of *The Dispossessed*, his first major collection, Berryman wrote to his mother to say that, «After eighteen months' thought, I came this morning suddenly on the *subject* for the long poem I've been drafting, and am elated; though it will be Fall at least before I can hope to get at it steadily.» (Berryman's emphasis; Kelly 228) The long poem was *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, about which John Haffenden has claimed Berryman «was very fond of declaring it took him exactly five years to write.» (Haffenden 9) Berryman's letter to his mother, however, suggests that the poem was on his mind for at least eighteen months longer than that. Haffenden takes this point on board, to a certain extent, by considering the effect an extra-marital affair in 1947 had on the writing of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. Nevertheless, some points regarding the poem's composition, and indeed Berryman's intentions, seem to be in contention. Why, for example, did Berryman need to spend eighteen months thinking about «the *subject*» for a long poem if it had already been written about in a long sonnet sequence? That sequence –eventually published in 1967 as *Berryman's Sonnets*– ends with an epilogue (taken from the story of Samson and Delilah in the Book of Judges), which reads: «Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again, as when he was shaven» (Judges, xvi.22). The epilogue suggests that Berryman felt he had recovered, emotionally and intellectually, after what was by all accounts a tumultuous affair, before he embarked on his next long project, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. As Sharon Bryan has argued, it is not necessary to read the poem as «a direct outgrowth of the *Sonnets*» (Bryan 147), nor is it incontrovertibly the case that *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* is an extension of Berryman's meditation on the themes of seduction and desire in the earlier work, as has often been stated. Indeed, the general critical unwillingness to consider *Berryman's Sonnets* –which was not published until 1967– as constituting much more than a record of the poet's first extra-marital affair has been paralleled in critical evaluations of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*.<sup>3</sup>

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remain unclear –although the essay's opening sentence («I hate America») may have had something to do with that.

<sup>3</sup> Recent accounts of the poem by Thomas Travisano and Edward Brunner have sought to revise the parameters for reading *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. Brunner's brief account of the poem's sexual politics is extremely pertinent and points to a much-neglected area of Berryman scholarship.

One of the earliest commentators on the poem, John Frederick Nims, asserted that it was «really about» Berryman's «need for a mistress, confidante, confessor.» (Nims 126) Nims wrote that: «One might think there would be more satisfactory candidates for this triple role among the living.» Haffenden's influential account of the poem concludes with a similar reflection on Berryman's need for what he calls «a figure uniting mistress and wife.» (Haffenden 33). He reads the long poem as «a lament for a doomed marriage,» citing Berryman's break-up with his first wife, Eileen Simpson, in evidence. Simpson left Berryman, however, only after the couple's return to the United States following a trip to Europe in August 1953, by which time Berryman had completed the manuscript for the poem and deposited it in a vault at the First National Bank in Princeton (Kelly 246). Berryman's feverish immersion in the writing of the poem, in the later stages especially, may well have contributed to the failure of his marriage to Simpson, but the poem itself involves much more, of much greater cultural resonance, than the dissolution of Berryman's first marriage.

Berryman explores the idea that a literary work might not be reducible to a single event in its author's life in his study of Stephen Crane, first published in 1950, where he asks, «Who knows how many origins a deep work has?» (SC 79) «Football was more instructive, probably, than Zola» (SC 78) he writes in his analysis of *The Red Badge of Courage*, referring to an earlier critic's amazement at Crane's ability to describe war when he had never experienced it firsthand. Berryman uses this example to emphasize the novelist's ability to record and extrapolate from a whole range of human experiences; Crane, he suggests, had «an ear like a trap» (SC 79). In short, Berryman believed that Crane's social alertness, his keen sense of what was going on in the world around him, was crucial to the development of his fiction. Berryman's recognition of Crane's engagement with social realities, however, has rarely commanded as much critical attention as the quasi-psychoanalytical «primal scene» sketched by him in the book's final chapter, which has prompted one critic to read Berryman's study as «substantially a self-portrait», «the product of an irresponsible countertransference» (Clendenning 186). Berryman's *Stephen Crane*, in other words, is often read for what it purportedly reveals about the poet's psychology and personal life rather than for its engagement with broader social and cultural concerns. In relation to *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, such readings ignore Berryman's claim that it «is a historical poem» (Berryman's emphasis; FP 329), a text that engages the poet's sense of Cold War America as a «scene of disorder» as he would suggest in his elegy for John F. Kennedy (CP 165).

In a prose piece written in 1965, Berryman complained that critics of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* had «overconsider[ed] such matters [as the] extended witch-seductress and demon-lover bit», before going on to describe the importance of his examination of «the turbulence of the modern world, and memory, and wants» in his major work *The Dream Songs* (FP 329-30), the first instalment of which (*77 Dream Songs*) was published in 1964. The subject of «the turbulence of the modern world,» however, is also central to Berryman's interrogation of the

American self in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, where he develops the critique of contemporary culture initiated –if sometimes poorly executed– in a number of earlier poems, including «Nineteen Thirty-Eight», «The Dangerous Year», and «Thanksgiving: Detroit» (CP 274-5, 278-9, 281-2). Discussions of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in terms of Berryman's marital and sexual life have directed critical attention away from important questions concerning the strategic intertextuality of the poem and its twentieth-century interpolations, thereby reinforcing what might be termed the *narrow* confessional approach that continues to characterise interpretations of not only Berryman's poetry, but also that of Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell. Warner Berthoff, for example, has argued that «[t]he idiosyncratic voicing of Berryman's *Dream Songs* [...] traces back through *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in 1956 to a sonnet sequence written at the end of the 1940s out of excruciating personal trouble» (Berthoff 34). By focusing, in the same way, on what Berthoff calls «the contours of private recollection», many commentators have ignored Berryman's cultural-political engagements in the poem and focused instead on the turn inward that is generally perceived as the dominant feature of confessional poetry.

In an undated and unpublished essay entitled «Africa: Some Notes on Modern Fiction», Berryman suggests that:

Few critics would deny, except as patriots, that a profound dissatisfaction with American life, by our writers, is so prominent a feature of our intellectual history as almost to be worth considering characteristic. Sometimes it has taken the form of impatience with America as an audience for art, sometimes the form of contempt for it as a subject, sometimes the form of personal dislike and rejection; but essentially it is one thing, an anti-patriotism.

Here Berryman reconsiders the political character of American writing, but he also signals the «anti-patriotic» element in his own work that –with regard to *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*– is more crucially concerned with exploring the relationship between America's past and its Cold War present than it is with providing a thinly disguised account of a love affair turned sour. Although the main topic of this unpublished essay is modern fiction, Berryman clearly had Ezra Pound somewhere in mind when he described «anti-patriotism» as a «form of impatience with America as an audience for art». Following Pound's example, indeed, Berryman learned that (in Pound's formula): «A work of art need not contain any statement of a political or of a social or of a philosophical conviction, but it nearly always implies one» (Pound 77).

Bruce Bawer has claimed that «Pound was not the idol» of the Middle Generation poets, but Berryman's contact with Pound during the late 1940s was crucial to his development (Bawer 123). Robert Lowell recalled Berryman's gleeful adulation of Pound when both poets visited Pound in St. Elizabeth's in Washington

in 1948 (Lowell 113),<sup>4</sup> but Berryman also conducted a correspondence with Pound in the late 1940s, one consequence of which was that James Laughlin of New Directions Press, at the bidding of «Ezra» himself, commissioned Berryman to edit a selection of Pound's work. In an unpublished letter, dated 27 June 1947, Laughlin informed Berryman that «Ezra would like to have you be the editor for the volume of his selected poems to go in the New Classics Series». In a later letter, written in August 1948, Laughlin explained that, «The whole purpose of this book is to get people to look at Pound the poet, to clear their minds of Pound the wacky, or Pound the traitor». Although New Directions eventually dropped Berryman as editor of the proposed selection, Pound himself considered Berryman an important young writer and in an undated letter, probably written early in 1947, he told Berryman that he should «group and agree with 3 men, as to what should be DONE. *directio voluntatis*. Then get 3 or 4 more [Sic]».

Berryman, however, was not willing simply to be recruited and placed wherever Pound wanted to put him. Following a meeting with Pound in February 1947, the poet Charles Olson reported to Berryman that:

We had it out again yesterday: 'Damn! yr. / generootion must find its own... 'Hang together or... 'Set up correspondence, committees of... (public safety?)... 'circulate letters, we did, London, 1912, Louis Zukowski... He badgers. Sez he: now Berryman, 1 of 4, 5 serious. [All sic].

In a later letter, written in March 1947, Olson explained to Berryman that Pound «craves letters from you and a few more but he also wants you and me to make five with Allen, Spencer, West, and circulate letters, robin round or otherwise, among ourselves». Nevertheless, Berryman was unwilling to collaborate with Olson on the project of instigating a poetry movement as proposed by Pound. Instead, in an undated letter to Pound from the same period, he named Dylan Thomas, Delmore Schwartz, and Robert Lowell as his closest «contemporaries». This is not insignificant: by recognising Thomas, in particular, as a closer contemporary than Olson, Berryman made a small but significant contribution to the project of extending the boundaries of American literary culture *against* what Geoffrey Hartman has called the compulsive «purging [of] Europe from America» that has been at the heart of mainstream American cultural ideology since Colonial times. (Hartman 119) In this sense, Berryman (like the Euro-centric Pound) was also a kind of «traitor» because he sought in his work to undermine the idea of a «representative American self» that, as Sacvan Bercovitch has argued, «For well over two centuries [...] subsumed the facts of social pluralism (ethnic, economic, religious, even personal) in a

<sup>4</sup> The Cuban poet José Rodríguez Feo offers further evidence of Berryman's enthusiasm for Pound in a letter written in December 1948, where he describes Berryman as a «mad chap» who «recites [...] Pound with a sort of fanatical entonation [sic]». See Coyle and Filreis 146-47.

comprehensive ideal» (Bercovitch 1975 186). The perpetuation of this «subsum[ing]» and «comprehensive» national self-image was central to American Cold War political and cultural ideology, but many American artists of the period refused to accept its authority, from Allen Ginsberg and Richard Yates to George Tooker and Jasper Johns. In *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, Berryman interrogates the origins of this idealised American self by focusing on the figure of Anne Bradstreet, the «tenth muse» or archetypal icon of New World or American experience.

Berryman discerned something of what Linda Hutcheon has termed the «complex intertextual cross-referencing» (Hutcheon 81) of modern writing when, in a discussion of Pound's poetry published in 1947, he said that «Poetry is a palimpsest» (*FP* 258). Shortly after Berryman had completed the first draft of the poem in April 1953, he wrote to his mother that he had come upon the following passage in John Keats's letters: «The innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its thousand materials before it arrives at that trembling delicate and snail-like [i.e., sensitive as a snail-horn] perception of Beauty».<sup>5</sup> (Cited in Kelly 245) Berryman's reference to this passage suggests not only that he was finally beginning to see *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in its completed form, but also that the poem was the result of an intense exchange between the poet's «intellect» and «its thousand materials». The reader of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* is subsequently encouraged to become what Udo Hebel has called a «text archeologist» (Hebel 140): although, as noted, it is frequently regarded as an exploration of an emotional crisis suffered by the poet, Berryman's breakthrough-poem can be described in very different, less solipsistic terms as a text that engages with American history and the Cold War crisis in the conception of the American self.

One of the sections of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* that has commanded a great deal of critical attention is that from the middle of stanza 18 to the end of stanza 21, which describes the birth of Anne Bradstreet's daughter Sarah. The section begins with a description of Bradstreet's realization that she may be pregnant, invoking both her morning sickness and her desire to have children: «Unwell in a new way. Can that begin? / God brandishes. O love, O I love. Kin, / gather.» (*CP* 137) Three stanzas later the «anguish comes to an end» with the poetess asking, «Is that thing alive? I hear a famisht howl» (*CP* 138). A typical reading of this segment comes from Joseph Mancini, Jr., who presents *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* as detailing «what [the Jungian psychoanalytical theorist] Nor Hall describes as a 'palatial interior life, labyrinthine levels of meaning to explore, red niches to dig souls out of, and deep enclosures for his own not-yet-born'» (Mancini 177). Mancini concentrates on what the poem reveals about Berryman's emotional life, his psychological profile, and the poet's psycho-sexual relations with his mother, his first wife, and his father. Discussing what he calls Berryman's «wombly art», Mancini argues that in writing *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* Berryman was enabled to «both inseminate the poetic egg and use his mothering energy to hatch it» (Mancini 177).

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<sup>5</sup> See John Keats, letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon, 8 April 1818 (Keats 128-30).

This reading, while it proposes an interesting view of the poem's composition, ignores important contextual issues that surrounded its publication, presentation, and critical reception in 1956. Significantly, when *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* was first published in the September-October 1953 issue of the *Partisan Review*, Berryman was not contractually bound to any publisher. In April 1955 Robert Giroux, a former classmate and friend of Berryman's at Columbia University in the 1930s, approached him about the possibility of publishing the poem with Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, where he would be among «friends», and the poet signed a contract in June 1955. The book, when it was finally published in 1956, won both the University of Chicago's Harriet Monroe Poetry Prize and a Rockefeller Fellowship in Poetry from the *Partisan Review*. As a further token of its impact on contemporary poetic practice, Allen Tate wrote to Berryman that *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* «adds a fourth to the three first-rate long poems by Americans in this century –the others being by Pound, Eliot, and Crane». (Cited in Kelly 298) Despite such high praise, however, Berryman was unhappy with the critical response to the poem's publication in book form. In a letter to his mother he said that «[a] deafening silence seems to be greeting *AB*» (Kelly 298).

At first, it is difficult to understand precisely what Berryman meant by this, since the poem was praised by a number of prominent literary critics –in addition to Tate, Conrad Aiken and Edmund Wilson rated the poem very highly– and it was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1956. One of the things that seems to have bothered Berryman, however, was the fact that no major literary review dealt in any meaningful way with the poem as a book, much less as a social or political intervention. The fact that the controversial left-wing painter Ben Shahn provided a series of illustrations for it went almost entirely unnoticed, one exception being Stanley Kunitz's remark at the end of his *Poetry* review: «The book is handsomely designed and printed, with drawings by Ben Shahn» (Kunitz 116). Obsessed by the idea that the poem represented merely a celebration of the Puritan origins of the American self on the one hand, and a thinly disguised confession of a love affair on the other, contemporary critics paved the way for subsequent evasions of the text's important dialogue with history, and its critique of contemporary American society. Shahn's involvement should have signalled an avenue towards that critique. Although Berryman had completed the poem some three years before Shahn agreed to provide a series of illustrations for it, the collaborative aspect of the book is clearly stated on the cover which reads, «*A poem, with pictures by Ben Shahn*». Berryman wrote to Shahn that he felt the drawings «create a good counterpoint for [the] poem», and Shahn replied that he believed the «juxtaposition» of picture and text was «groundbreaking»: the illustrations would «set a stark, lean New England mood in which the images and sensibilities of [the] poem can take place very much as New Englanders live within their very often fierce landscape without either bowing to the other». The correspondence between poet and painter suggests that, while the poem may have been published in a periodical three years before, the 1956 Farrar, Straus and Cudahy edition represented more than

a convenient marketing ploy conceived by Berryman's publisher for the Christmas market.

To the degree that Berryman believed Shahn's work was essentially in harmony with his own, it is important also to consider Shahn's status at this time. When his first major retrospective was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1947, Shahn's work had been recognised for its critical exposition of «the shortcomings of democracy in the United States», and as recently as 1954 he had been profiled in *Life* magazine as the «Painter of Protest». <sup>6</sup> Berryman, then, was implicitly making a particular set of claims for his own work as social commentary when he agreed to have Shahn illustrate what was the most important publication of his career in 1956. Nonetheless, Shahn's political positioning did not deter critics from reading *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* as a poem that uncritically valorises the American experience and the national self. Comparing *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* to Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, for instance, Kunitz suggested that Berryman was attempting «to relate himself to the past through the discovery of a viable myth, and to create for his vehicle a grand and exalted language, a language of transfiguration» (Kunitz 110). Kunitz failed to realize, however, that Berryman was less concerned with discovering «a viable myth» than he was with dismantling and interrogating a myth that was already long in existence, namely the myth of American exceptionalism.

The closeness of the Berryman-Shahn association is evident on the first page of the 1956 edition. The drawing that also features on the book's cover, of a wooden house at the edge of a forest, is placed opposite the title of the poem and the first stanza. Picture and text occupy approximately the same amount of space on the page, thus reinforcing Berryman's claim regarding the contrapuntal relationship between text and illustration. The bleakness evoked by Shahn's drawings reflects the fact that almost every one of the fifty-seven stanzas of the poem records the hardship and precariousness of Anne Bradstreet's life in the New World. Since it is precisely through the rendering of Bradstreet's consciousness that Berryman gradually sets the stage for a sort of parallel commentary on his own times, we are obliged to recount her experience and impressions (as re-envisioned in the poem) in some detail. Mistress Bradstreet appears in the fourth stanza, «Pockmarkt & westward staring on a haggard deck» (*CP* 133). The New World that awaits her, however, is not the one she has been promised: «Outside the New World winters in grand dark / white air lashing high thro' the virgin stands / foxes down foxholes sigh», Berryman writes in the second stanza (*CP* 133), presaging the harrowing description of Bradstreet's first year in the Colonies in stanzas 7, 8, and 9.

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<sup>6</sup> See Anonymous, «Ben Shahn: Painter of Protest Turns to Reflection,» *Life* 4 Oct. 1954: 96-100. The importance of the ideological dimension of Shahn's work was restated in a review of a 1998 exhibition of his work at the Jewish Museum in New York. Entitled «Trying to Separate Ben Shahn's Art from His Politics», the review described the way that during the 1950s Shahn «became, in a sense, the country's official leftist artist, or at least the official artist for millions of Americans leaning to the left». For his leftist «leanings» Shahn was brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1959. See Kimmelman 33-37.



The journey across the Atlantic was itself fraught with calamity and fear for Bradstreet, as Berryman describes in the fifth stanza:

By the week we landed we were, most, used up.  
Strange ships across us, after a fortnight's winds  
unfavouring, frightened us;  
bone-sad cold, sleet, scurvy; so were ill  
many as one day we could have no sermons;  
broils, quelled; a fatherless child unkenelled; vermin  
crowding & waiting; waiting. (CP 134)

If crossing the Atlantic was traumatic, however, the settlers' arrival in the New World was worse: just as their ship, the *Arbella*, came in sight of land, «young Henry Winthrop [...] drowned» (CP 134). Their arrival in the New World marred by the death of young Winthrop, they also saw the expected land of plenty turn out to be a place of starvation and disease:

How long with nothing in the ruinous heat,  
clams & acorns stomaching, distinction perishing,  
at which my heart rose,  
with brackish water, we would sing.

[...]

That beyond the Atlantic wound are woes enlarge  
is hard, hard that starvation burnishes our fear,  
but I do gloss for You.  
Stranger & pilgrims fare we here,  
declaring we seek a City... (CP 134)

Etymologically, the verb «to fare» not only means to go, travel, or make one's way, but also to «go astray» (become lost) or even die («depart from life»). The Puritan's faring in the New World is thus presented by Berryman as an enterprise riven by doubt and the possibility of failure, the possibility that the «City» they sought was nothing more than a fiction.

In 1965 Berryman said *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* «laid itself out in a series of rebellions» on the part of his protagonist: «against the new environment and above all against her [Anne Bradstreet's] barrenness (which in fact lasted for years), then against her marriage [...] and finally against her continuing life of illness, loss, and age» (FP 328). But the poem also enacts a further «series of rebellions» –against the formal strategies of Berryman's early work on the one hand, and in opposition to the exceptionalist understanding of American history and culture on the other. In stanzas 9 and 10 Berryman not only provides a clear sense of the seventeenth-century

poet's displacement both to *and* in the New World, but he also suggests that Anne Bradstreet was sceptical about the claim that a «New Jerusalem» –the «City upon a Hill»– could ever be discovered or constructed there:

Winter than summer worse, that first, like a file  
 on a quick, or the poison suck of a thrilled tooth;  
 and still we may unpack.  
 Wolves & storms among, uncouth  
 board-pieces, boxes, barrels vanish, grow  
 houses, rise. Motes that hop in sunlight slow indoors, and I am Ruth  
 away: open my mouth, my eyes wet: I would smile:  
  
 vellum I palm, and dream. Their forest dies  
 to greensward, privets, elms & towers, whence  
 a nightingale is throbbing.  
 Women sleep sound. I was happy once.  
 (Something keeps on not happening; I shrink?)  
 These minutes all their passions & powers sink  
 and I am not one chance  
 for an unknown cry or a flicker of unknown eyes. (*CP* 135)

The exceptionalist version of American history and culture points to both the beginning and the end of New World history: the «beginning» referring to the seventeenth-century settlement of certain parts of America by English Puritans, and the «end» pertaining to what Bercovitch has called «the new end-time Eden» (Bercovitch 1993 157). That Edenic ideal has persisted in the American imagination for centuries, from the sermons of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Colonial ministers, such as William Hubbard and Jonathan Edwards, to the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson in the nineteenth-century, for whom, as Bercovitch notes, «America is a garden of plenty [...] a magazine of power» (Bercovitch 1993 63). Edwards described the Colonial settlements of the seventeenth century in terms of «the rising of a New Heaven and a New Earth in the New World», and (after Bishop Berkeley<sup>7</sup>) he frequently praised «the Westward course of Empire» in his writing. (See Bercovitch 1993 156-57) It is significant, then, that in Berryman's description of Anne Bradstreet's arrival in the New World, she is «Pockmarkt & westward staring on a haggard deck» (*CP* 133), watching the «Garden of Eden» draw closer not with joy and delight, but with trepidation and fear.

The anticipated sanctuary of a «new end-time Eden», in other words, is permanently deferred in Berryman's poem where it is re-figured in nightmarish terms.

<sup>7</sup> Described by A. A. Luce as Berkeley's «only known serious poem,» the final stanza of «Verses by the Author, on the prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America» begins with the line «Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way.» See Berkeley 373.

In stanza 55 of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, for instance, Berryman offers a bleak vision of a contemporary, Cold War America that is overshadowed by the threat of nuclear holocaust and bedevilled by racial and international conflict:

Headstones stagger under the great draughts of time  
after heads pass out, and their world must reel  
speechless, blind in the end  
about its chilling star: thrift tuft,  
whin cushion – nothing. Already with the wounded flying  
dark air fills, I am a closet of secrets dying.  
Races murder, foxholes hold men,  
reactor piles wage slow upon the wet brain rime. (CP 146)

This is not a «new end-time Eden» but a terrifying other-world, a «Hard and divided heaven» that «creases» the poetess, as Berryman puts it in stanza 36:

...My breath is scented, and I throw  
hostile glances towards God.  
Crumpling plunge of a pestle, bray:  
sin cross & opposite, wherein I survive  
nightmares of Eden. Reaches foul & live  
he for me, this soul  
to crunch, a minute tangle of eternal flame. (CP 141)

Berryman goes even further in the penultimate stanza of the poem, where he describes the early Colonial settlements as «drowned towns off England»; they are «featureless as those myriads / who what bequeathed save fire-ash, fossils, burl'd / in the open river-drifts of the Old World?» (CP 146). His claim that the Colonial Puritans «bequeathed» nothing but «fire-ash» and «fossils» here suggests that the high ideals that Bradstreet and her fellow-settlers lived and died for were worth nothing in the end: there will be no «end-time Eden,» he suggests, but everything will eventually be fossilized and reduced to «fire-ash» in an atomic war. In these concluding stanzas of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* Berryman articulates the same fear that Robert Lowell expresses in his early poem «Mr. Edwards and the Spider» (Lowell 48-50). There, as Jonathan Raban has remarked, «[f]or Edwards, death signifies the abundant grace, justice and order of a living, if vengeful God». For Lowell, however, as Raban continues –and the same might be said of Berryman, whose later poetry offers a profound meditation on the difficulty of sustaining religious faith in the (post)modern world –«death is a widow– in the twentieth century it has lost the consolation of the promise of an afterlife as it has lost the logic of a divine judgement» (Raban in Lowell 165).

In «A Sympathy, A Welcome», written after the birth of his first child in 1957, Berryman described his son's arrival in the world in the following terms: «Feel for

your bad fall how could I fail, / poor Paul, who had it so good. / I can offer you only: this world like a knife» (CP 157). The «world like a knife» described here is, of course, the same «New World» that «welcomed» the *Arbella* in 1630 and, twenty-three years earlier, Captain John Smith in 1607. In another short poem from this period, «Not to Live» (subtitled «*Jamestown 1957*» and written for the 350th anniversary of the settlement at Jamestown) Berryman writes: «It kissed us soft, to cut our throats, this coast» (CP 157). These very short poems may be read as footnotes to *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in their reiteration of Berryman's questioning of the Colonial enterprise in the longer piece and in his portrayal of the emergence of the modern American state as a flawed and incomplete –and ultimately unfeasible– enterprise. In each of these poems from the 1950s Berryman sought to encourage contemporary American readers to reconsider the Colonial myth and the exceptionalist appraisal of American history that was crucial to the propagation of Cold War American ideology. Read in this way, finally, we can see that Berryman's «colonial poem» –which has rarely been read as anything more than a proto-confessional text– is much more acutely concerned with an interrogation of the American self and the nation's difficult history than critics have often acknowledged.

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