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"We Want Anti-models": John Berryman's Eliotic Inheritance

BRENDAN COOPER

In his study *Modern Poetry after Modernism*, James Longenbach criticizes the lingering critical perception of the postmodernist development in poetry as a "breakthrough" narrative that rebelled against the traditionalism and impersonality of Eliotic modernism. As he points out, postmodern poets in fact confronted Eliot via a series of intricate and ambivalent interactive processes that are not confinable within this "breakthrough" narrative. In this paper, I use Longenbach's argument as a starting point for a re-examination of Eliot's influence on the major poetry of one of his more apparently vocal opponents: John Berryman. Berryman's attitude towards Eliot was radically ambivalent, based on an idea that poetic predecessors must become "anti-models," figures whom the contemporary poet can only incorporate through productive gestures of reaction against them. In the light of this idea, I show that in Berryman's major works, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and *The Dream Songs*, Eliot exerts a far stronger and more significant influence than has hitherto been recognized. My discussion of Berryman's participation in a postwar "Eliotic inheritance" allows for readings of these two poets that are not dependent upon crude oppositions between the "impersonal" and the "personal". And as a consequence it opens the way for richer and more nuanced readings of Berryman's work as well as for invigorating reassessments of Eliot's own verse and his influence on twentieth-century poetry.

In his study *Modern Poetry after Modernism*, James Longenbach has criticized the subsistence of misconceived readings of postmodernist poetry that rely on conceptions of modernism no longer adequate in contemporary critical discourse. "Today," he writes, "our sense of modernism continues to change, but our characterizations of postmodern poetry too often depend on outmoded notions of modernism."[1] The problem, as he describes it, is the lingering perception of the postmodernist development in poetry as a

Brendan Cooper recently completed his Ph.D. at Downing College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, CB2 1DQ. Email: brendanbcooper@yahoo.co.uk

[1] James Longenbach, *Modern Poetry after Modernism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4. Longenbach favours a broad conception of "postmodern" poetry as any written self-consciously in the shadow of the modernist achievement, rather than any more ideologically oriented one that signifies more exclusively the term's associations with the avant-garde and postwar developments of the Pound tradition.

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"breakthrough" narrative that rebelled against the traditionalism and impersonality of Eliotic modernism. The successful maintenance of this "breakthrough" narrative involves a reversion to inadequate and outdated New Critical readings of modernist texts – readings which themselves, as Longenbach testifies, "exaggerated and codified the poetics of tradition and impersonality" at the expense of recognizing its more subversive and Dionysian qualities.[2] Critics such as James E. Breslin, Jerome Mazzaro and David Perkins, who continue in this way to perceive modernism "as a movement whose poems are easily characterized as traditional, impersonal, and hierarchical," are criticized by Longenbach for their reductive tabulations of both modernist modes and postmodernist developments of them.[3]

The poet who has most often been at the centre of the postmodern "breakthrough" narrative is Robert Lowell, whose career has retrospectively been codified as a development away from New Critical modernist formality towards the reactionary formal freedoms, anti-clerical rebelliousness and progressive personalism of *Life Studies*. Such an approach, notes Longenbach, "offers a narrow and inadequate reading even of Lowell's career," since it drastically oversimplifies the complex trajectory of Lowell's poetic development into a single defining moment of emancipatory breakthrough.[4] Longenbach also extends the inapplicability of such a narrative to other poets of the same generation – both to poets associated with an avant-garde counterculture, such as John Ashbery and Allen Ginsberg, and to more supposedly "traditional" poets such, as Elizabeth Bishop, Theodore Roethke and John Berryman. All these poets confronted Eliot via a series of intricate and ambivalent interactive processes that are not confinable within a "breakthrough" narrative, their development proceeding not away from Eliot but "within an Eliotic inheritance that poets found more varied and accommodating than most readers recognized."[5] This argument, asking for rereadings of such poets in terms of an Eliotic influence that endures throughout their major poetry, opens up one possibility for a fresh approach

[2] Ibid., 7.

[3] Ibid., 6. Charles Altieri, an advocate of the "breakthrough" narrative and a supporter of James Breslin's analysis of postwar developments away from New Critical paradigms, expresses his opposition to Longenbach's argument in a long footnote in *Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1998) 83–84 n. One motive for this paper is to show how the case of Berryman provides support for Longenbach's argument, how his complicated engagement with Eliotic modernism is not confinable to the "breakthrough" narrative on which Altieri and others insist.

[4] Longenbach, 5. Longenbach extends this point to suggest that "We may also need to abandon the notion that *Life Studies* is the crucial achievement in Lowell's career." Ibid., 17.

[5] Ibid., 7.

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to postwar developments of modernist poetics. In this paper I hope to contribute towards this larger argument through examination and vindication of Eliot's influence on the major poetry of one of his more apparently vocal opponents: John Berryman.[6]

A variety of public statements Berryman made have helped foster a conception of him as a passionately anti-Eliotic poet. In a 1965 essay on the development of his own work he said, of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, "One of my first thoughts was: Narrative! Let's have narrative, and at least one dominant personality, and no fragmentation! In short, let us have something spectacularly NOT *The Waste Land*, the best long poem of the age."[7] The aggressive desire herein to distinguish himself from Eliot has led to a critical perception of *Homage* as "the poem with which Berryman sought explicitly to evade the influence of T. S. Eliot."[8] But, in fact, Berryman's assertion of opposition displays a relational rhetoric that intimates the significance and unavoidability of Eliot's influence. "Let us have something spectacularly NOT *The Waste Land*": the combativeness of the language nevertheless contains a request to consider the Berryman and the Eliot poem simultaneously, to view the two works as part of a single modernist / postmodernist "spectacle." In other words, Berryman only distances his work from *The Waste Land* via an invitation to a comparison with a poem he subsequently praises as "the best long poem of the age." The energy of this statement reveals something quite distinct from a desire to "evade" Eliot's influence; instead, it reflects a generative hostility, a postwar anxiety of influence in which opposition and antagonism exist as catalysts for dialogue and interaction.

There is, then, a diametrical quality to Berryman's rhetoric. The energy of opposition is conflated with that of recognition, creating a movement away from and towards Eliot at the same time. A similar ambivalence can be noted in his 1969 acceptance speech for the National Book Award, in which he said, "I set up the Bradstreet poem as an attack on *The Waste Land*; personality, and plot … I set up *The Dream Songs* as hostile to every visible tendency in

[6] The paper directly leads to the larger question of Berryman's development of other modernist (or premodernist) models – in particular, other exponents of the long poem in whom Berryman betrayed significant interest, such as Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Bo Gustavsson briefly discusses Pound's *Cantos* as a "personal" epic that influenced Berryman's work in *The Soul Under Stress: A Study of the Poetics of John Berryman's Dream Songs* (Uppsala and Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1984), 30–32.

[7] John Berryman, "One Answer to a Question: Changes," in *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 323–31, 327.

[8] Stephen Matterson, *Berryman and Lowell: The Art of Losing* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 5.

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both American and English poetry."[9] These words have been cited more than once as indications of Berryman's reactionary and anti-Eliotic stance.[10] An inspection of the speech as a whole, however, reveals a much more complicated position, since the above passage immediately follows a veneraton of Eliot's achievement:

> Both the writer and the reader of long poems need gall, the outrageous, the intolerable – and they need it again and again. The prospect of ignominious failure must haunt them continually. Whitman, our greatest poet, had all this. Eliot, next, perhaps even greater than Whitman, had it too. Pound makes a marvelous if frail third here. All three dazzlingly original, you notice, and very hostile, both Pound and Eliot, to Whitman. It is no good looking for models. We want anti-models.

Whether Eliot is definable as "American" or not, he is in Berryman's eyes at least the equal of Whitman. Pound and Eliot form, with Whitman, a tradition of successful long-poem composition, the success of which stems from their brave indulgence in experimentation and risk. Moreover, it is "hostility" that marks Eliot and Pound's attitude to Whitman within this tradition. The meaning of Berryman's statement about *Homage* as an "attack on *The Waste Land*" is conditioned by this context, in which he adumbrates a conception of poetic influence as manifested by antagonism and hostility. Poetic predecessors become "anti-models," figures whom the contemporary poet can only incorporate through productive gestures of reaction against them.[11] It is in this light that Berryman's attitude to Eliot must be understood: that of a radically ambivalent scheme of influence that centralizes hostility as the most productive means of ingesting and developing modernist (anti-)models.[12]

[9] John Berryman Papers, University of Minnesota, "Speeches, Lectures, Readings."

[10] See, for instance, John Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (London: Macmillan, 1980) 5–6; Deanne Fernie, "The Difficult Homages of Berryman and Bradstreet," *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, 7, 1 (2003), 14.

[11] In a tribute to Pound, written on the occasion of his 80th birthday, Berryman wrote, "I cannot consider him the peer of Eliot as a poet. The body of his poetry may be more interesting, but I have in mind the sequence Prufrock-Gerontion-The Waste Land-Ash Wednesday-The Quartets, and Pound cannot rival it. Who can? Chaucer perhaps. Wordsworth? And I question as a devoted admirer of that great poet." Such exuberant admiration of Eliot quashes any simple sense of Berryman's "dislike" or "rejection" of him. Later in the same piece Berryman notes that, in response to Pound, "Lowell went Miltonic: that was reaction: that's influence." Berryman, "A Tribute," *Agenda*, 4 (Oct.–Nov. 1956), 27–28.

[12] In his conception of poetic influence as an antagonistic duel between a poet and his predecessors, Berryman's ideas bear clear resemblance to those of Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

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This rhetorical duplicity challenges any understanding of Berryman's approach as simply a personalistic reaction against Eliot's impersonal traditionalism. There is evidence that, as early as the 1940s, Berryman was reading Eliot in a manner quite distinct from the then popular view that he was a paradigmatic purveyor of modernist impersonality. In his 1948 review of *T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique*, edited by Leonard Unger, he complains,

> One observes a certain desire in the universities to disinfect Mr. Eliot by ignoring his disorderly and animating associations … Perhaps we have not got it yet. Perhaps in the end this poetry which the commentators are so eager to prove impersonal will prove to be personal, and will also appear then more terrible and more pitiful even than it does now.[13]

Berryman suggests the possibility of a personalistic reading of Eliot's work at odds with the then prevalent New Critical interpretations in Unger's anthology.[14] In an unpublished essay entitled "Mr Eliot's Poetry & Criticism" he wrote in exasperation, "I am as bored as the reader can plausibly be with the spate of at any rate what passes for literary criticism in serious journals just now, and esp[ecially] criticism of T. S. Eliot."[15] These disagreements with critical understandings of Eliot should condition how we read Berryman's later apparent disagreements with Eliot, such as his response in a 1968 interview, when asked about his insistence that *The Dream Songs* be read as one poem: "Ah – it's personality – it's Henry … The reason I call it one poem is the result of my strong disagreement with Eliot's line, 'the impersonality of poetry'."[16] His quarrel is not with Eliot's poetry here but with his "line," a doctrine of impersonality descended from Eliot's critical output, and for which Eliot is thus responsible, but one that is not necessarily applicable to Eliot's own poetry. Berryman's opposition is "directed not so much at Eliot himself as at a critical establishment that smoothed his work into a 'doctrine'," and his rhetoric of rebellion needs to be understood in relation to a dialogue with Eliotic modernism in which he participates.[17]

[13] John Berryman, "A Peine Ma Piste," *Partisan Review*, 15, 7 (1948), 826–28.

[14] In the margins of his personal copy of the volume, Berryman scribbled disagreement with D. S. Savage's suggestion that Eliot displayed a "constant emphasis of impersonal values at the expense of personal ones," and also Stephen Spender's opinion that "Gerontion" is an "objective" poem. [15] John Berryman Papers, Prose (Unpublished), Box 6.

[16] "An Interview with John Berryman," in Harry Thomas, ed., *Berryman's Understanding: Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 3–17, 5.

[17] Longenbach, *Modern Poetry*, 8. In another unpublished essay, entitled "The Old Criticism," Berryman – as the title implies – directly attacks the stultifying critical limitations of the New Critics. But Eliot – though he "stands behind the school" – is not included within it: "I think the persistently general character of Mr Eliot's interests and sympathies during this

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Berryman's rejection of the "impersonal" Eliot dismantles the notion that his approach is anti-Eliotic personalism in any uncomplicated sense, and it opens the way for a more nuanced and multidirectional mode of interpretation. The dissolution of the concepts of "impersonal" and "personal" as coherently related opposites that accurately define the differences between Berryman and Eliot is the key to a reading of each poet that does not rely on such heavy-handed paradigms. The important work of scholars such as Ronald Bush and Ronald Schuchard, that highlights the personal qualities of Eliot's verse – as well the recent studies of David Chinitz and Marjorie Perloff, that redirect attention towards Eliot's pop culture and avant-garde properties – might consequently be accompanied by critical readings of Berryman that do not seek conveniently to dispense with him as a simply a solipsistic, traumatized confessionalist.[18]

A recognition of the ultimate inadequacy of the breakthrough narrative also allows for a reading of Berryman's mature poems that demonstrates Eliot's influence operating at a level more profound than has yet been recognized.[19] In 1953 Berryman completed *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, which has since become widely identified as his "breakthrough" work.[20] The poem has become the object of biographical readings that have explored the "essential personalism of its theme" in terms of events from Berryman's own life.[21] I do not wish to dismiss these readings as invalid or irrelevant, but they have served to lock the poem into a limiting personalistic context that has suppressed its political – and specifically its religiopolitical – significances.

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period forbids us to include him with what might be thought of as his school. If Eliot broadens and develops, as he does, the school has narrowed and died." John Berryman Papers, Prose (Unpublished), Box 2.

[18] See Ronald Bush, *T. S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Marjorie Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); David E. Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[19] Sharon Bryan recognizes "echoes of and resemblances to Eliot" in Berryman's poetry, but does not go on to note any specific allusions to Eliot in Berryman. See Sharon Bryan, "Hearing Voices: John Berryman's Translation of Private Vision into Public Song," in Richard Kelly and Alan Lathrop, eds., *Recovering Berryman: Essays on a Poet* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 141–46, 141.

[20] See Gary Q. Arpin, *The Poetry of John Berryman* (Port Washington and London: Kennikat Press, 1978), 47; Sarah Provost, "Erato's Fool and Bitter Sister: Two Aspects of John Berryman," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 30, 1 (1984), 69–79, 69; Luke Spencer, "Mistress Bradstreet and Mr. Berryman: The Ultimate Seduction," *American Literature*, 66, 2 (1994), 353–4.

[21] Haffenden, *A Critical Commentary*, 5. For such biographically oriented readings see ibid., 5–10; Spencer, 353; and especially Provost, 69–79.

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"Berryman," writes Philip Coleman, in an important essay on the poet's political voice, "is seldom acknowledged as a poet of socio-cultural, not to mention post-modern, critique."[22] This reluctance to explore the politicized quality of Berryman's poetry has hindered recognition that *Homage* is an intensely political work, which subversively engages with Puritan history as a means of interrogating the spiritual condition of mid-twentieth-century America. And in order to construct this interrogation, Berryman develops the religiopolitical outlook of one defining modernist work in particular: *The Waste Land*.[23]

Berryman's poem gestures towards *The Waste Land* in a number of significant and readily apparent ways. It features notes, written with the same playful and coy incompletion employed by Eliot. Gary Arpin says of Berryman's notes that they are "in their repetition of our most famous modern poem's idiosyncrasy – trademark, really – a bit daring," but surely their presence suggests something more fundamental than the extent of Berryman's ambition – they are a revelation of Berryman's desire to set up *Homage* in dialogue with *The Waste Land*, to place his long poem ostentatiously in relation to Eliot's long poem.[24] It might also not be entirely coincidental that the two works are strikingly similar in length: *Homage* runs to 456 lines, *The Waste Land* to 433. More pertinent than this, though, is the thematic parallel between the two works, the way in which *Homage* incorporates *The Waste Land*'s descriptions of cultural entropy and twentieth-century spiritual desiccation.

In *Homage*, Berryman distorts the historical facts about Puritan culture and reduces Anne Bradstreet into religious rebel and adulterous lover in order to subvert the utopian, Winthropian mission upon which the Puritan errand was based. Seventeenth- and twentieth-century Americas are paralleled, becoming reflections of each other. Some of the opening stanzas describe a pioneer landscape that is hostile and violent:

> Outside the New World winters in grand dark
> white air lashing thro' the virgin stands
> foxes down foxholes sigh,
> surely the English heart quails, stunned.[25] (2: 1–4)

[22] Philip Coleman, "The Scene of Disorder: John Berryman's 'Formal Elegy'," *Irish Journal of American Studies*, 8 (1999), 201–23, 204.

[23] Alan Golding, in the course of a study on canon formation in American poetry, is the only critic to my knowledge who has properly noted Eliot's influence on *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. See Alan Golding, *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 57–69.

[24] Arpin, 3.

[25] All quotations are taken from John Berryman, *Collected Poems 1937–1971* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990).

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Elizabeth Davis notes the sexual implications here of "virgin stands," "foxes down foxholes sigh":[26] experience of the New World landscape is akin to that of a woman's loss of innocence. Bradstreet is recurrently depicted in the poem as remembering her precolonial life as a lost Edenic origin, a "greensward" garden of previous contentment where she "was happy once" (10: 2, 4). The voyage to America is envisaged as an "Atlantic wound" (8: 1), a process of violation or spiritual injury in direct opposition to Winthrop's anti-European religious idealism. Berryman undermines the religious utopianism intrinsic to the premise of the Puritan mission by imagining the passage to the "New World," the New Jerusalem, as a descent from innocence into sexuality and human sin. There is also a more broadly political message present here; the "white air" implies the invasion of white colonials into America and their subsequent persecution of Native Americans, while the verb "lashing" connotes the system of slavery that was to become a central facet of colonial American economy. These underlying reverberations in Berryman's language exemplify the way in which broader cultural commentary is encoded within the more directly personal focus of his poem.

The above lines are mirrored in a stanza towards the end of the poem when, the "poet" returned to his own time, the New World is remembered as the "Old World." Here, twentieth-century America is described in language that echoes the depictions of the Puritan wilderness, but now the scene is even darker, the landscape's violence replaced by human violence:

> 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. (55: 5–8)

The "white air" of colonial America has decayed into the "dark air" of modernity, wherein the multitudes "wounded" in war are "flying," scattered prolifically over the landscape. This flying of the wounded denotes the vicious impact of shells and bullets at the same time as it ironically implies spiritual ascent and the Passion of Christ: in this landscape torn apart by war, spiritual redemption can only appear as a savage mockery of itself. Here in the modern world, whole "races" murder, whole nations war with other nations; by implication, moreover, whole "races" are murdered, in the genocides of the Holocaust and the Great Terror. The "foxholes" of the seventeenth-century American landscape now "hold men": the innocence and naturalness of the image is lost, as the "foxholes" assume their modern

[26] Elizabeth Davis, "Berryman Saved from Drowning" in Richard Waswo, ed., *On Poetry and Poetics* (Tübingen: Narr, 1985), 171–90, 178–9.

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military meaning of a strategic dugout for Second World War soldiers; George Oppen recalled one of these artificial foxholes as the location for his own wartime injuries: "88 mm shell landed in a foxhole: Three of us were in that foxhole."[27]

The last line of the stanza represents a significant evocation of the nuclear-age present in which the poet writes. The "reactor piles" which themselves "wage" like a war on the modern world embody the descent of man into the paranoia and anxiety of the Cold War, an era of history incorporating the unprecedented prospect of mankind's entire self-destruction.[28] The "wet brain rime" described by Berryman refers – as he tells us in a note – to "edema," or oedema, an inflammation of the brain (*CP* 148). It appears as a disturbing suggestion of the modern poet damaged by nuclear radiation, or perhaps more generally by the destructiveness and decay of the contemporary world. The phrase also echoes and contrasts with Bradstreet's "bald / abstract didactic rime" that the poet criticizes in stanza twelve. Bradstreet's limited poetry – her creative fertility stunted by her own spiritual rigour and the repressive asceticism of New England theocracy – is ultimately replaced in the twentieth-century by something more disturbing: a diseased poetry, contaminated by a surrounding reality of corruption, decay and destruction towards which the intervening three centuries have descended. In a manuscript note Berryman wrote that "wet brain," as a description of oedema, refers to "the last phase of alcoholism."[29] This reading suggests modern poetry as a poetry of alcoholic disease, with the modern poet forced into alcoholism by the unbearable terror of the contemporary world.

In its depiction of American history as a development from deluded utopian origins towards the moral and spiritual disorder of the war-torn mid-twentieth-century present, Berryman's work represents a furtherance of the bleak commentary on the ennui of the modern urban space as put forward

[27] George Oppen, *Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 203. The image of "foxholes" here, especially in the context of the references to genocide, maintains a connotative value behind its primary military meaning, as it suggests too the mass graves of the Holocaust. It also perhaps hints at the trenches of the First World War.

[28] Ivy Schweitzer notes that these lines associate "the male poet's own moral corruption and spiritual emptiness with the decline of modern, postwar society, the rabidity of racist nationalism, and the abuse of nuclear power." Ivy Schweitzer, "Puritan Legacies of Masculinity: John Berryman's *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*," in Aliki Barnstone, Michael Tomasek Manson and Carol Singley, eds., *The Calvinist Roots of the Modern Era* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), 125–41, 139.

[29] John Berryman Papers, Published Poetry, Box 2, Folder 10.

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by Eliot in *The Waste Land*. The poem might be thought of as a postwar "waste land" that directly develops Eliotic themes at the same times as it distinguishes itself from Eliot through its voicing of two distinct "personalities." As Berryman's "anti-model," Eliot becomes the catalyst for contradictory energies of rejection and acceptance in a manner in accordance with Eliot's own conception of blasphemy, whereby he perceives that "the sense of Evil implies the sense of good," and that the application or confrontation of Evil may provide a contrary redemptive possibility: "damnation itself is an immediate form of salvation – of salvation from the ennui of modern life, because it at last gives some significance to living."[30] This religious conception of blasphemy as a "paradoxial" activity has been yoked into a literary context by Maud Ellmann, who explores the way in which Eliotic "blasphemy" might be mapped onto Eliot's attitude to literary influence. *The Waste Land* becomes, for Ellmann, "an extended blasphemy" in the sense that its relationship with the literary canon involves "affirmation masked as a denial."[31] The disembodiment of canonical texts into fragments that the poem effects is blasphemous in precisely this sense: "As blasphemy, *The Waste Land* is obliged to poach upon the past, caught in a perpetual allusion to the texts that it denies."[32] Berryman's appropriation of *The Waste Land* might be thought of as an identically "blasphemous" interaction with a canonical text, rendering affirmation and denial simultaneously present. He reacts against the absence of a coherently defined "I" through the provision of two voices, those of Anne Bradstreet and the twentieth-century "poet," which speak the entire poem. But this coexists with a deep thematic debt to *The Waste Land*, its depiction of a spiritually dissolute modernity, of a world where "He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying / With a little patience."[33] Indeed, Berryman himself summed up his ambivalent engagement with Eliot's poem in an interview, where he said that in "*Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* my model was *The Waste Land*, and *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* is as unlike *The Waste Land* as it is possible for me to be."[34] The poem is an "attack on *The Waste Land*" only at the same time as it is a recognition of – or homage to – *The Waste Land*, replicating the contradictory attitude to prior canonical texts displayed in *The Waste Land* itself.

[30] T. S. Eliot, "Baudelaire," in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 427.
[31] Maud Ellmann, *The Poetics of Impersonality: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), 95.
[32] Ibid., 96.
[33] See T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 76.
[34] Peter Stitt, "The Art of Poetry," in Thomas, *Berryman's Understanding*, 18–44, 29.

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This capacity for a reading of *Homage* receptive to Eliot's influence shows that Berryman's development towards his own mature poetic voice need not be seen as involving an "evasion" of Eliot. One question that unavoidably arises from this is that of whether Berryman continued to engage with Eliot so significantly thenceforth, and the beginnings of an answer once again lie back in his review of Unger's essay anthology. In it, he takes a special interest in an essay by Ferner Nuhn. "Mr. Nuhn," writes Berryman, "says the poem is mock-heroic. This is no frivolous suggestion."[35] Berryman's interest in mock heroism here resonates strikingly with the long poem he was to begin writing in 1955, and which was to become his most famous work. This resonance further amplifies upon inspection of Nuhn's essay, as he argues therein that in *The Waste Land* "Eliot reduces London and the fate of western Europe to mock tragedy":

> When humanity is not important enough for sympathy, a hero will not be serious enough for sacrifice. He may, however, be a mock hero, and it is a mock hero and mock heroics that actually emerge from "The Waste Land." … Our hero has been buried alive in the underworld, fried in the lava of the burned-over land, tossed sizzling into the deepest sea, struck by a triple thunderbolt from the highest heaven. Still he neither succumbs nor triumphs. The heroics simply won't come off. At the end we still have the hero unchanged, fishing in the same pond, ready for more bolts, burning, burying, and drowning.[36]

Berryman's interest in this kind of reading, which perceives the poem as the narrative of a single "mock-hero," is consistent with his inclination for a more "personal" reading of Eliot that challenges New Critical assumptions. Moreover, Nuhn's description of *The Waste Land* reads uncannily like a template for the subsistence of Henry in *The Dream Songs*. Therein, Henry is recurrently described via mock-heroic analogies that provide a subversive and comic commentary on the nature of his predicament. He becomes "Sir Bones, or Galahad" (2), suffers "plights and gripes / as bad as achilles" (14), Achilles herein spelt, as Berryman once put it, "with rage with a small letter at the beginning."[37] Later, in Book VII, he ludicrously imagines himself as a Spenserian knight, calling himself "Sir Henry" (316), battling dragons and wooing maidens with whom he evinces more an uncontrollable sexuality than any identifiably chivalric purpose. On occasion, he even becomes a kind

[35] Berryman, "A Peine Ma Piste," 828.
[36] Leonard Unger, ed., *T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique* (New York and Toronto: Rinehar and Company, 1948), 133.
[37] See Haffenden, *A Critical Commentary*, 56. All quotations are taken from John Berryman, *The Dream Songs* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990).

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of Christ-parody: "I now must speak to my disciples, west / and east" (112). Further to this, his survival as a mock-hero subverts the tragedy of the poem in precisely the way described by Nuhn. Henry is "buried alive in the underworld" in the *Opus Posthumous* songs that constitute Book IV of the poem, only to resurface again grudgingly in Song 91. He too "neither succumbs nor triumphs", suffering the torments of the Nuhnian mock-hero without achieving either the escape of death, the bliss of salvation or the torment of damnation. Henry is pulled apart again and again in the poem, physically, spiritually and psychologically, yet still is "surviving" (191), "continuing Henry" (133), "imperishable Henry" (341), a parody of the tragic hero, "not serious enough for sacrifice."

The possibility that Nuhn's interpretation of *The Waste Land* acted as a catalyst for Henry's mock-heroic condition in *The Dream Songs* clearly involves a degree of speculation, but it is supported by the fact that Eliot exerts a far stronger and more significant influence on Berryman's poem than has hitherto been noted. *The Dream Songs* are lavishly studded with Eliot's presence. Dream Song 11 begins, "My mother goes. The mother comes & goes," echoing Prufrock's women "talking of Michelangelo," but with the latter's distant "women" replaced by a highly personalized image of the "mother," imbuing Henry's Prufrockian anomie with an Oedipal psychological anxiety (enforced by the innuendo of "comes") surrounding the mother-figure. In Dream Song 29 the "grave Sienese face" that haunts Henry recalls the Dantean echo at line 293 of *The Waste Land* ("Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew / undid me"), which Eliot notes as stemming from La Pia's speech in Canto V of the *Purgatorio*. La Pia was reputedly murdered by her husband, Nello dei Pannocchieschi; the allusion resonates with Henry's anxiety in this song that he might commit murder, specifically against female victims ("But never did Henry, as he thought he did, / end anyone and hacks her body up / and hide the pieces, where they may be found").[38] Anne Warner has seen Henry in Song 185 as a Tiresias-figure, "amphibious" and "hermaphroditic," who wears the "habits" of a nun and whose breasts have grown womanish through "gynecomastia."[39] The assumption of a Tiresian guise in the very middle of his poem resembles Eliot's use of Tiresias' voice in the middle of *The Waste Land*; a voice that, Eliot mysteriously said, "unit[es] all the rest."[40] Also, the death-by-water images employed by Eliot

[38] George F. Wedge notes Eliot and Dante as a possible source for Berryman's "Sienese face" in "The Case of the Talking Brews: Mr. Berryman and Dr. Hyde," in Kelly and Lathrop, *Recovering Berryman*, 229–40, 235–36.

[39] Anne Warner, "Dream Song 385: A Summing Up," *John Berryman Studies*, 3, 1–2 (Winter–Spring 1977), 8–24, 20.

[40] Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 82.

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in "Prufrock" and *The Waste Land* recurrently appear in *The Dream Songs*, occasionally through the employment of manifestly Eliotic language, as in the Prufrockian beginning to Dream Song 355: "Cling to me & I promise you'll drown too, / this voyage is terminal, I'll take your beauty down / and ruined in sea weed / then it will seem forever." The shadow of Eliot in this Song is underlined by Henry's subsequent claim that "we are a 'possum, treed," a phrase that recalls Pound's favoured nickname for Eliot: in Song 53 Berryman explicitly refers to Eliot as "the honourable Possum," and one may even speculate that Henry's recurrent monicker of "Pussycat" owes something to the animalism of Eliot's playful pseudonym. And perhaps most provocatively of all, in Song 271 Henry proclaims "Today, in April, the clouds have personalities," a line that playfully recalls the opening of *The Waste Land* in order to satirize the critical adherence to a stale paradigm of Eliotic impersonality with which Berryman was evidently frustrated – and which has continued to loom in reverse form over discussions of Berryman's own work.

An especially interesting instance of an Eliotic shadow in the poem occurs in Dream Song 14. Here, Henry laments "Life, friends, is boring": Henry has no "Inner Resources," since he is "heavy bored." This notion of boredom is, I wish to argue, an echo of Baudelairean ennui – and, by extension, of Eliot's appropriation of the concept. This connection may be vindicated through attention to the essentially metaphysical theme of this song. Henry tells us that "the sky flashes, the great sea yearns, / we ourselves flash and yearn," and the images of sky and sea recurrently appear throughout the poem as significations of the fundamentally fragmented nature of human reality; in the final song, they cannot be reconciled into the redemptive unity of a "middle ground." Here in Song 14 the flashing and yearning of sky and sea is comparable to, yet separate from, that of "ourselves," with self and world – "things & the soul" – disunited in the post-Christian spiritual vacuum of the mid-twentieth century. In the final stanza to this song, "somehow a dog / has taken itself & its tail considerably away / into mountains or sea or sky," into precisely these disunited fragments of the world. The correspondence that the song establishes with such key images of spiritual disillusionment invites a reading of this "dog" as a blasphemic typographical inversion of "god." It is this absent god, "*deus absconditus*, who, by withdrawing from the world, has precipitated the corruption and the pain which now characterize it."[41] In the subsequent moral vacuum lies only ennui. In

[41] Arpin, *John Berryman*, 63.

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his copy of Eliot's *Collected Poems*, Berryman annotated the rape scene in Part III of *The Waste Land* as evidence of "Ennui (Baud.)" and the "loss of the knowledge of Good + Evil,"[42] and Song 14 sees Berryman developing ennui into his own context. Its metaphysical connotations become reduced to more everyday "boredom"; the image is secularized, blasphemed against. The blasphemy of the typographical game-playing of "dog" / "god" is coupled with a blasphemic reduction of the metaphysical conceit of ennui to the plainness and secularity of "boredom." Berryman, that is, replicates Eliot's religious "blasphemy" in this song at the same time as he performs an act of literary "blasphemy" against Eliot. Baudelairean / Eliotic ennui is appropriated through an Eliotic process of blasphemy that conflates allusion with denial, enacting the radically double-edged conception of influence that Berryman's belligerent prose essays and speeches implicitly adumbrate.

Other significations of Eliot's influence float around *The Dream Songs* that are tantalizing but of more inscrutable validity. The source of Berryman's title for the poem is a matter of some debate, but one possibility is particularly interesting with respect to Eliot: the third part of "The Hollow Men" originally appeared, along with a few other verses, as "Doris's Dream Songs" in *The Chapbook: A Miscellany* in 1924.[43] Also, Berryman's employment of minstrelsy as a trope in *The Dream Songs* has a precedent in Eliot's own references to minstrel shows in his poetry. Of particular note is Eliot's use of Tambo and Bones as characters in *Sweeney Agonistes*: here, they appear and sing "Under the Bamboo Tree," and it is intriguing to note the correspondence between, on the one hand, the "bamboo tree" and the "sound of the sea" of which Tambo and Bones sing and, on the other, the images of the "tree" and "sea" that Berryman introduces in the last stanza of Dream Song 1 and which recur throughout his poem.[44]

But it is in the final song of Berryman's poem, number 385, that Eliot's presence becomes most powerfully manifest – indeed, Eliot is so deliberately

[42] In an unpublished manuscript fragment, Berryman was to write of "boredom as our prob. #1." John Berryman Papers, Prose (Unpublished), Box 2.

[43] Eliot, "Doris's Dream Songs," *The Chapbook: A Miscellany*, 39 (1924), 36–37.

[44] Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 131–32. As Michael North notes, the "Under the Bamboo Tree" piece from *Sweeney Agonistes* was taken from a Johnson–Cole–Johnson hit musical number – "a sensation during the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904, which Eliot attended with his family." Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 10.

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and multivalently located in this song that Berryman's intention to establish his work in dialogue with Eliot is palpable:

> My daughter's heavier. Light leaves are flying.
> Everywhere in enormous numbers turkeys will be dying
> and other birds, all their wings.
> They never greatly flew. Did they wish to?
> I should know. Off away somewhere once I knew
> such things.
> Or good Ralph Hodgson back then did, or does.
> The man is dead whom Eliot praised. My praise
> follows and flows too late.
> Fall is grievy, brisk. Tears behind the eyes
> almost fall. Fall comes to us as a prize
> to rouse us toward our fate.
> My house is made of wood and it's made well,
> unlike us. My house is older than Henry;
> that's fairly old.
> If there were a middle ground between things & the soul
> or if the sky resembled more the sea,
> I wouldn't have to scold
>
> my heavy daughter.

In this song, not only is Eliot referenced in line eight; the surrounding language also echoes at least two different Eliot poems. A senescent Henry, plagued by a loss of memory and knowledge, resembles "Gerontion," "an old man in a dry month, being read to by a boy, waiting for rain." But while Gerontion complains "My house is a decayed house," Henry sees that "My house is made of wood and it's made well, / unlike us."[45] Berryman reworks the image of the house in order to accentuate the contrast between human ephemerality and the relative permanence of the house as a human construct. A similar motive is evident with another allusion made in this song, to Eliot's "Marina." The invocation to the poet's daughter that frames Eliot's poem is replicated at the beginning and ending of Berryman's song. In "Marina," however, the daughter becomes a figure of possibility, through which the poet might successfully discover an ultimate unity "where all waters meet."[46] By contrast, in Song 385 the daughter is, like the poet, trapped in a landscape of spiritual dislocation in which completion and unity are unavailable. There is no "middle ground between things & the soul," the sky does not resemble the sea; self and world form a network of incompleteness that is not redeemed by the prospect of unifying religious enlightenment.

[45] Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 39. See Denis Donoghue, "Berryman's Long Dream," in Thomas, *Berryman's Understanding*, 152–66, 165.

[46] Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 115–16.

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The explicit reference to Eliot in this song ("the man is dead whom Eliot praised") follows on from his reference to "good Ralph Hodgson," the early twentieth-century nature poet, whose spiritual wisdom might have saved the poet from his metaphysical quandaries. Hodgson's poetry, heavily influenced by Romantics such as Blake, Wordsworth and Keats, focusses on the access to divinity and spiritual enlightenment provided by the natural world, and is both appropriately and reductively mentioned here in context of Henry's speculations on the metaphysical properties of Thanksgiving turkeys.[47] Eliot exuberantly praises Hodgson's amiable character in one of his "Five-Finger Exercises":

> How delightful to meet Mr Hodgson!
> (Everyone wants to know *him*).
> He has 999 canaries
> And round his head finches and fairies
> In jubilant rapture skim.
> How delightful to meet Mr. Hodgson!
> (Everyone wants to meet *him*).[48]

Eliot's playful picture of Hodgson's "canaries" and "finches and fairies" advertises the associations he made in his poetry between birdlife and spirituality, whilst also mischievously implying his eccentricity. Berryman's decision to foreground an allusion to such a comic, surrealistic and relatively minor Eliot poem is provocative in the light of the more significant poems to which he more subtly gestures in the song, gestures which themselves involve a subversive distortion of those images' original significance. The overall effect is of Berryman playing games with Eliot and his achievement, in a manner that is simultaneously antagonistic and respectful. The echoes of Eliot in this song together constitute an ambivalent and ludic interaction with Berryman's modernist predecessor that forms a significant aspect of the theological negativity of the poem's anticlimax.

Berryman's long poems both, therefore, construct a dialogue with Eliot that can be usefully illuminated by an application of the conception of influence implied in his prose. An acceptance of contradiction and duality in his rhetoric opens up a way of reading these poems whereby antagonism might productively coexist with influence. Eliot said of blasphemy in *After Strange Gods* that "no one can possibly blaspheme unless he profoundly

[47] The significance of Hodgson in this song has been thoroughly discussed in "A Symposium on the Last Dream Song," *John Berryman Studies*, 3, 1–2 (Winter–Spring 1977), though all these critics remain resolutely silent on the significance of Eliot herein.

[48] Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 151.

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believes in that which he profanes."[49] It might be said of Berryman that he "believed" in Eliot in order to blaspheme against him; his long poems are anti-Eliotic only at precisely the moments when they are Eliotic, as Eliot, in becoming Berryman's "anti-model," simultaneously becomes his model. One result of this is a clearer perception of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and *The Dream Songs* as responses to *The Waste Land*, as developments of the latter's post-Christian religious despondency in a mid-twentieth-century context similarly incompatible with traditional religious faith. This might lead to a reading of Berryman less dependent on his personal life, and more open to his poetry's religiopolitical significance. *The Dream Songs* might be interpreted less narrowly as an explication of Berryman's emotional traumas through the facile mask of Henry, but as a commentary on a "Fallen world" and a "nation … that has dispensed with its religious heritage and prostituted its moral character."[50] And more broadly, the advancement of critical thinking beyond the labelling of Berryman as an anti-Eliotic confessionalist might not only afford new and richer readings of Berryman's work; it might provide the foundation for further reassessment of Eliot's own poetry and influence on subsequent twentieth-century verse.

The "breakthrough" narrative can thus be fruitfully replaced by a more contradictory and ambivalent scheme of reading that vindicates the significant continuing influence of Eliot in Berryman's mature work. In a late interview, Berryman spoke of his attitude to Eliot in terms of a gradual accumulation of appreciation for his achievement:

> I had to fight shy of Eliot. There was a certain amount of hostility in it, too. I only began to appreciate Eliot much later, after I was secure in my own style. I now rate him very high. I think he is one of the greatest poets who ever lived.[51]

Not only does the language of hostility and fighting shy again suggest the intimacy, the unavoidable proximity of Eliot's presence; Berryman's comment actually suggests an inversion of the "breakthrough" narrative,

[49] T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1934), 56.

[50] Susan G. Berndt, "The Last Word," *John Berryman Studies*, 3, 1–2 (Winter–Spring 1977), 75–83, 78, 83. A recent collection of essays on Berryman, edited by Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan, represents a resurgence of scholarly interest in Berryman's work that will hopefully nourish further reassessments of Berryman and his location in the canon of 20th-century American poetry. See Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan, eds., *After Thirty Falls: New Essays on John Berryman* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2007).

[51] "The Art of Poetry," in Thomas, 18–44, 25.

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with Berryman developing not away from Eliot but away from immature rejection towards an enlightened appreciation of his accomplishment. It was when Berryman was "secure in [his] own style" that he was able to construct a successful and usable dialogue with his modernist predecessor. Both *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and *The Dream Songs* should be read in the context of a postwar Eliotic inheritance of which they self-consciously form a part.

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