

# *The life of John Berryman*

John Haffenden



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John Berryman***

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## *A note on spelling and punctuation*

From the time of his arrival in England in 1936 (shortly before his twenty-second birthday), Berryman adopted the English spelling of all words which have American variants, and retained that convention for the rest of his life – in letters and journals, and in publications. Accordingly, all quotations given from Berryman's published works, and transcriptions from his unpublished writings and letters, follow his own form. By the same token, all quotations from his writings which predate his arrival in England in 1936 follow the originals. Likewise, the punctuation is in all cases Berryman's own, apart from any unintentional slips which are my responsibility.

# *Chronology*

- 1914 Born, 25 October, the son of John Allyn Smith and Martha (Little) Smith, in McAlester, Oklahoma, where father works in a bank.
- 1919 Birth of Robert Jefferson, Berryman's brother.
- 1920/21 The Smith family moves to Anadarko, Oklahoma, where father works in the First State Bank and John attends West Grade school.
- 1924 John Allyn Smith resigns his post at the bank and is appointed Assistant Game and Fish Warden.
- 1925 Parents make a reconnaissance trip to Florida, while John and his brother become boarders at St Joseph's Academy in Chickasha, Oklahoma.
- 1926 The Smith family takes up residence in Tampa, Oklahoma, where John Angus McAlpin Berryman becomes their friend; John Allyn Smith commits suicide; Martha marries John Angus McAlpin Berryman, whose adoptive sons presently take his surname; the Berryman family moves to New York City, where John attends Public School 69, Jackson Heights.
- 1928 John enters South Kent School in Connecticut; bullied and unhappy, he none the less makes good academic progress.
- 1931 Attempts suicide.
- 1932 Enters Columbia College, New York, where, under the influence of his mother and of Mark Van Doren, he eventually makes the grade as a scholar.
- 1936 Graduates Phi Beta Kappa, and wins the Euretta J. Kellett scholarship to study in England; takes up residence at

- Clare College, Cambridge, where his tutor is George Rylands; attends a talk by T. S. Eliot; meets W. H. Auden.
- 1937 Befriends Brian Boydell; meets Dylan Thomas; also meets W. B. Yeats at the Athenaeum Club; meets Beatrice, who becomes his first fiancée, and takes a summer holiday with her in Germany; wins Oldham Shakespeare Scholarship.
- 1938 Returns home to New York, where Beatrice later visits him; meets Bhain Campbell, and becomes part-time poetry editor for the *Nation*.
- 1939 Meets Delmore Schwartz; is appointed Instructor in English at Wayne State University, Detroit, where he begins to suffer from a state of nervous collapse which is diagnosed as *petit mal*.
- 1940 Berryman is appointed Instructor in English (for four months) at Harvard University; publishes 'Twenty Poems' in *Five Young American Poets*; Bhain Campbell dies.
- 1941 Berryman meets Eileen Patricia Mulligan.
- 1942 Publishes *Poems*; marries Eileen.
- 1943 Ends appointment at Harvard; grubs for jobs and tackles some temporary appointments, including three weeks' teaching at the Iona School, New Rochelle, and is finally appointed Instructor in English for one year at Princeton University, where he works with Richard Blackmur; meets Erich Kahler and Christian Gauss.
- 1944 Meets Robert Lowell; lectures for three weeks at Briarcliff College, New York, and is then awarded a Foundation research fellowship by the Rockefeller Foundation; works on an edition of *King Lear*; meets Dwight Macdonald, Paul Goodman, and Edmund Wilson.
- 1945 Records his poetry for the Library of Congress; his Rockefeller Fellowship is renewed for a further year; commissioned to write a book on Stephen Crane; writes 'The Imaginary Jew', which wins first prize in *Kenyon Review*-Doubleday Doran contest.
- 1946 Becomes Associate in Creative Writing at Princeton University (1946-7), where his students include W. S. Merwin, Bruce Berling, Sidney Monas, and William Arrowsmith.
- 1947 Meets and falls in love with 'Lise', and writes a sequence of sonnets later published (1967) as *Berryman's Sonnets*;

- meets T. S. Eliot and Ben Shahn; begins psychiatric treatment.
- 1948 Starts work on 'Homage to Mistress Bradstreet'; has other love affairs; publishes *The Dispossessed*; meets Saul Bellow and Ezra Pound; is appointed Resident Fellow in Creative Writing at Princeton University (1948-9).
- 1949 Works on an unfinished sequence of poems, *The Black Book*, and on his study of Stephen Crane; wins Guarantors Prize (*Poetry*) and Shelley Memorial Award (Poetry Society of America); is appointed Alfred Hodder Fellow at Princeton University (1950-1).
- 1950 Teaches one semester at the University of Washington, Seattle; wins Levinson Prize (*Poetry*); publishes *Stephen Crane* (critical biography); lectures for two weeks at the University of Vermont; meets Randall Jarrell.
- 1952 Spends spring semester as Elliston Professor of Poetry at the University of Cincinnati; undertakes more intensive work on 'Homage to Mistress Bradstreet'; awarded Guggenheim Fellowship (1952-3) for critical study of Shakespeare and for creative writing.
- 1953 Completes 'Homage to Mistress Bradstreet' (first published in *Partisan Review*); John and Eileen Berryman spend the summer months in Europe, where they meet Theodore Roethke and Louis MacNeice; they visit the MacNeices in London, where Eileen is hospitalised for a back injury; Berryman is separated from Eileen and spends the latter part of the year in New York City.
- 1954 Teaches one semester of creative writing at the University of Iowa (where he also begins to study Hebrew); his students include W. D. Snodgrass and Donald Justice; teaches a summer school at Harvard, where his students include Edward Hoagland; returns to teach at Iowa in the fall, but is dismissed after a drunken altercation; at Allen Tate's suggestion, moves to Minneapolis; begins a long period of dream-analysis.
- 1955 Starts teaching in Humanities at the University of Minnesota, where his chairman is Ralph Ross; at work on *The Dream Songs*.
- 1956 Translates Paul Claudel's 'Le Chemin de la croix' for Antal Dorati; divorced from Eileen; marries Elizabeth Ann Levine; publishes *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*; awarded Rockefeller Fellowship in poetry by *Partisan Review*.
- 1957 Awarded Harriet Monroe Poetry Prize; son, Paul, is

- born; Berryman is awarded a tenured appointment in Humanities and English at the University of Minnesota; visits Japan; lectures for two months in India under the auspices of the United States Information Service; spends last weeks of the year with his family vacationing in Spain.
- 1958 Appointed Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Minnesota, but is aggrieved when a Special Faculty Meeting votes to disestablish the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies; publishes *His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt*.
- 1959 Divorced from Ann; awarded the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award; teaches for two weeks in June at the University of Utah.
- 1960 Teaches one semester in the Department of Speech at the University of California, Berkeley; publishes (with Ralph Ross and Allen Tate) *The Arts of Reading*, an anthology with commentary.
- 1961 Spends eight weeks teaching at the School of Letters, Indiana University; marries Kathleen (Kate) Donahue, his third and last wife.
- 1962 Teaches at Bread Loaf School of English, Middlebury, Vermont; meets Robert Frost; becomes visiting professor (1962–3) at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island; participates in National Poetry Festival, Washington, DC; his first daughter, Martha, is born.
- 1963 Family spends summer weeks in rural Rhode Island; Berryman receives an award from the Ingram Merrill Foundation; family resides for some weeks (1963–4) in Washington, DC.
- 1964 Publishes *77 Dream Songs* (the first volume of *The Dream Songs*); wins Russell Loines Award (National Institute of Arts and Letters); buys house at 33 Arthur Avenue S.E., Minneapolis.
- 1965 Awarded Pulitzer Prize for *77 Dream Songs*; awarded Guggenheim Fellowship for 1966–7.
- 1966 The family lives in Dublin (1966–7).
- 1967 Awarded 5,000 dollars by the Academy of American Poets; receives 10,000-dollar award from the National Endowment for the Arts; publishes *Berryman's Sonnets and Short Poems*.
- 1968 Publishes *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (the conclusion of *The Dream Songs*).
- 1969 *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* wins the National Book



Award and the Bollingen Prize; publishes *The Dream Songs* (complete edition); appointed Regents' Professor of Humanities at the University of Minnesota; admitted for treatment at Hazelden, an alcoholic rehabilitation centre.

- 1970 Treated for alcoholism at Abbott Hospital, Minneapolis; then at the Intensive Alcohol Treatment Center, St Mary's Hospital, Minneapolis; joins Alcoholics Anonymous; publishes *Love & Fame*.
- 1971 Works on a novel, *Recovery*, and on poems later collected in *Delusions, Etc.*; birth of Sarah Rebecca, second daughter; is awarded a Senior Fellowship by the National Endowment for the Humanities.
- 1972 Commits suicide, 7 January.

#### POSTHUMOUS PUBLICATIONS

- 1972 *Delusions, Etc.*
- 1973 *Recovery*, a novel
- 1976 *The Freedom of the Poet*, essays and stories
- 1977 *Henry's Fate & Other Poems, 1967-1972* (edited with an introduction by John Haffenden)

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# 1

## *Introductory*

My engagement with John Berryman began in 1970, at a time when I was reading for a research degree under the supervision of Professor Richard Ellmann at Oxford University. My topic was a study of the modern American long poem, taking into consideration texts by Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Olson. After some months of failing to discover the significant lines of my proposed comparison, I turned dizzily to Berryman's *Dream Songs* with a naive view to including them under the same rubric. I had first read the *Songs* in the late 1960s, when they left me decidedly interested but baffled. Reading them again in 1970 and 1971, I found myself perhaps a little less baffled but stimulated beyond belief and compelled to understand more. I wrote a preliminary essay on Berryman and sent it to Berryman's London publisher. When I was invited to Faber & Faber in January 1972, I missed the day's newspaper on my journey and only learned on arrival that Berryman had just committed suicide.

I had recently read Berryman's latest volume, *Love & Fame*, which excited me as an entirely accessible book, teeming with idiomatic and moral risks and raising fascinating problems of form. Berryman seemed to have taken his real life on board in a new way. One poem, 'Friendless', for example, begins

Friendless in Clare, except Brian Boydell  
a Dubliner with no hair  
an expressive tenor speaking voice

— lines which readily conjured up the Professor of Music I had met while an undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin. Unable to control my curiosity, I contacted Professor Boydell, and from that

point on my eagerness to comprehend the life of John Berryman would not be checked. With considerable lack of tact I wrote to Mrs Kate Berryman after only a few months, and she properly met my importunate queries by politely temporising. Eventually, at Easter 1974, while teaching at the University of Exeter, I made my first visit to Minneapolis: my search for John Berryman had truly begun.

Berryman belongs to what has become known as the Middle Generation of American poets, a group that includes Delmore Schwartz, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and Theodore Roethke. It is a critical convenience to call much of their work 'Confessional', a classification to which Berryman himself responded with 'rage and contempt'. 'The word doesn't mean anything,' he protested. Such a label may produce a sweet theory, but it might turn out – just as another theory turned out for those who attempted to use flamingoes as croquet-mallets in *Alice in Wonderland* – to be limp in application. Certainly the individual writers of that generation (it may be worth recalling that W. H. Auden was only eight years older than Berryman) either knew each other personally or had affinities with one another's work, but the question of literary affiliation cannot be glossed in terms of an easy succession. In popular opinion, as my own students sometimes tell me, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, published in 1959, instigated a new fashion of opening poems nakedly to the personal life which was followed by Sylvia Plath and her imitators. Even if that facile view were partly true, we need to reckon with the fact that Berryman began writing his *Dream Songs* in 1955 (not to mention *Berryman's Sonnets* from 1947) without knowing of Lowell's *Life Studies*: so the matter of borrowing or influence immediately runs up against an awkwardly anachronistic hitch. Anyway, influence runs in many directions. In the late 1960s, after the publication of *The Dream Songs*, Lowell wrote to Berryman, 'I think I am in your debt – at least I say so in my preface. I've just completed a long poem, *Notebook of a Year*. . . . It's considerably shorter than yours, and very different.' Evidently cautious of the possibility that critics might pan him for directly imitating Berryman, Lowell wrote him again in September 1969, 'I think anyone who cared for your book would for mine. Anyway, we're accomplished beyond jealousy. Without you, I would find writing more puzzling.' Whether he derived more from Berryman as a person or from his writing is a question which must be left to critics at large to assess and interpret, but I don't think it snide to point out that a Freudian slip on Lowell's part betrayed his feeling that he had actually gained much from Berryman's literary example: that last sentence originally read, 'Without your book, I would

find writing more puzzling.' Furthermore, indebtedness is not confined to a reciprocity between one poet and another. Berryman publicly acknowledged that he took a certain charge off at least one novelist, Saul Bellow. 'In the Bradstreet poem, as I seized inspiration from *Augie March*, I sort of seized inspiration, I think, from Lowell, rather than imitated him.' When Bellow finished his novel *Herzog*, Berryman wrote him this fan-letter: 'Nobody has ever sat down & wallowed to this extent in his own life, *with* full art – I mean, novelists. I don't know of anything to compare it to, except you. . . . Go to heaven.' The fact that Berryman limited his praise to Bellow's achievement in the genre of the novel may imply that he reserved a like success to his own work in verse.

What I mean to say is that it requires another book altogether – and *many* books will come – to analyse Berryman's proper place in the literary culture of his historical epoch. The present book is the story of one life; it certainly draws on Berryman's friendships and associations, but I have not attempted to explore the entire literary milieu, only the psychology of one man. Time and study should tell us, for example, how much Lowell's work speaks to a sense of cultural and social history, and how much Berryman's is a function of moral and spiritual preoccupations.

Literary success and critical acclaim came late to Berryman. In retrospect he could announce with some wry satisfaction, 'early fame is very dangerous indeed, and my situation, which was so painful to me for many years, was really in a way beneficial.' The irony of that pronouncement is a sad one to investigate, since Berryman was a middle-aged man before he did his best work, and he lived only to the age of fifty-seven. Although what is arguably his greatest achievement, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (which cost him untold anguish of spirit and energy in the early 1950s), earned intense praise – Edmund Wilson called it 'the most distinguished long poem by an American since *The Waste Land*' – it captured no quick public, and the poet had to labour into his last decade of life before his masterpiece, *The Dream Songs*, would be widely acknowledged as the product of someone quite other than a literary minimus. The course of his life runs the whole gamut from personal degradation to artistic ecstasy. It is, to say the least, distinguished for energy and intensity: he suffered the early suicide of his father, the dominance of his mother, poverty and professional setbacks, alcoholism and spiritual vexation. On one level, his story is that of an obsessional neurotic; but if he was cranky, he was also vibrant and entertaining, an electrifying and fearful teacher, loving and silly, occasionally unkind but far more often overwhelmingly generous toward his friends, lovers, colleagues and students.

Berryman's most severe critics have held him to be egocentric, self-indulgent and obscurantist, but Berryman's work nowhere rehearses the vanity denounced by such views. Fame, or the fact that he was not what Hemingway called a good drunk, Berryman sometimes took as his privilege for bad behaviour, but such conduct puts a scandal only on the man, not on his work. Whatever his subject, the poet imagines and composes it. While I relish the poet Douglas Dunn's belief that 'poems should come on as strong as they can', I would need persuading beyond reason to believe that Berryman belongs to what he has called 'the tradition of the crazed exposure of the American ego'. With respect to the hero of what he once termed the 'Tragical History' of *The Dream Songs*, Berryman observed, 'Henry both is and is not me, obviously. We touch at certain points. But I am an actual human being; he is nothing but a series of conceptions – my conceptions.' I see no reason to quarrel with that definition, and it is not a contradiction to say that his work draws on his life for subject-matter.

In what way, then, if at all, does the life throw light on the work? Although, as some critics believe, the imagination has no biography, biographical information can assuredly illuminate and provide an aid to analysis of the poems, even if it cannot explain them. To take one notable example: the poem *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* is centrally concerned with childbirth, motherhood, adultery and alienation. Berryman declared that several factors contributed to his feeling of being ready to write the poem in 1952–3. One was his tremendously strong sense of guilt over the fact that his wife Eileen had not had a child, for which he blamed himself far more even than for his affairs. Throughout the marriage he had felt deeply ambivalent at the prospect of fatherhood, and had compounded it after 1947 through his adulteries, heavy drinking, and staying up all too often through the night. In a late interview with the *Paris Review* he made the misleadingly simple assertion that 'we very much wanted a child', but it comes much nearer to the truth of his experience to say that he always had dreadfully divided feelings about the possibility of becoming a father, feelings which pervaded the writing of the poem (see also note to Chapter 10).

That is a pointed example, but it does underline the need for us to discriminate the truths of Berryman's life from the sometimes unreliable constructions he himself put upon it, and from the conclusions critics might otherwise draw from unstable or improper evidence. It obliges us to be generously wary of the poet's own developing sense of his identity and history, and indeed to spell out all the biographical facts, of which any number gloss the vivid work which is Berryman's legacy. My study of Berryman's major

poems, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (Macmillan and New York University Press, 1980), will I hope complement this book.

In a very informative and useful work, *John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), Joel Conarroe saliently remarks,

The details of artists' lives have a strong attraction for us; this is especially true of a writer as brilliant, as troubled, and as flamboyant as Berryman. We are compelled to ask questions, some of which are probably unanswerable, about his erratic behavior and about the sources of his art. Did he, with the death of his father, suffer an irreversible loss, one that was to be the source of the guilt and despair that dominated his adult life? Can a man mourn a loss for nearly fifty years, or is such mourning merely an excuse for heavy drinking? Was it his loss of faith, following his father's suicide, that was in fact responsible for his lifelong anxiety? Was it his mother after all, as his posthumous novel suggests, who was the dominant person in his life? Was his preoccupation with fame a product of his insecurity? Were his classes and poetry readings, at times spellbinding and at times incoherent, an essential form of reinforcement? Did his sense of personal debasement also require reinforcement, thereby contributing to his behavior? Was he, as he suggests here and there in his work, latently homosexual? Are his *Dream Songs*, as Lewis Hyde insists, to be explained away as the self-pitying indulgences of a resentful alcoholic? Would he have survived in a city with an intellectual climate different from that of Minneapolis? Is there anything anyone could have done to rescue him from himself? Was his suicide a deliberate act? Was it impulsive? Was it, like that of Hemingway, a response to physical and intellectual deterioration?

I hope that the following pages provide the evidence, if not all the answers.

I have tried to trace the process of one man's life, both the dignity and the distress. Writing such a book within a relatively short period of Berryman's death, I have encountered and attempted to come to terms with the problems of historical perspective. While sentimentality should perhaps be avoided in writing about the recently dead, affection and irritation, for example, may have a place. As I discovered at an early stage of research Berryman's life story is not available to a synthetic view: the interstices of his complex career tell us as much as the achievements and prominent



deeds, the high or the hot spots. I have been partial less to explanation than to information, in the conviction that greater knowledge might lead to deeper appreciation. In reading other lives, I have been struck, for example, at how infrequently biographers give details of the bank balances of their subjects. And yet the state of one's pocket is more than a material matter, it is a moral and spiritual condition, and I have accordingly included a number of facts about Berryman's earnings. I have often felt that determinative interpretations of a biography are postulated on the supposition that the dense pattern of a real life should yield to meanings as simple as a rhumb; they sell the reader short by trimming texture to a thesis. Biography is an art, but it owes a primary obligation to truth. To that end I have taken it as my brief to relate all the necessary facts of Berryman's life. To avoid offence to persons still living, I have omitted some facts, but I have done my best to avoid falsehood. In certain instances I have consented or chosen to employ pseudonyms in preference to specifically identifying persons. The name 'Beatrice' is used by agreement, and I have taken the convenient course of retaining the name 'Lise' (a pseudonym invented and used by Berryman in *Berryman's Sonnets*) for the woman who figured in his life during 1947 (chapter 9). Likewise, in a very few other passages where identification would serve no useful purpose, I have reduced two proper names to their initials – 'J' and 'S' – and two others (in a brief passage from Berryman's journal quoted in chapter 3) to random initials, 'Y' and 'Z'.

Although I have felt grave qualms over the radical issue of warts, there is some consolation in knowing that Berryman reckoned his life story would be written, and that he felt sanguine at the prospect. While examining his papers, I experienced a gratifying *frisson* when I read a passage from a Paris letter of December 1936 which describes an evening stroll to the aptly named Rue de la Lune, where he 'looked up and lo! it was the moon – right large & white & round in a purple sky.' Describing the phenomenon, young Berryman knowingly added in parentheses, 'Note to my biographer – leave that out, it's true but it ain't convincin'.' In later years he was occasionally heard to account for his behaviour with a remark such as, 'It's all part of my biography, that's all!' The years brought him spells of deep personal joy and artistic fulfilment, but all too heavy a hand of terrible suffering. Towards the end Berryman himself pinpointed the tragic irony of his life in these remarks to Peter Stitt:

I have . . . a feeling that endowment is a very small part of achievement. I would rate it about fifteen or twenty percent.  
Then you have historical luck, personal luck, health, things like