

[Back to index](#)

## Lost Voices of the Trans-Atlantic Journey: Three Texts by John Berryman, Robert Hayden and J.M. Coetzee

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### 1. Introduction

This study analyses three literary works dealing with the impact of the transatlantic journey on the contemporary redefinition of Anglophone literary history. The works are: John Berryman's long poem *Homage to Mistress Anne Bradstreet* (1956), Robert Hayden's poem "A Letter from Phillis Wheatley" (1978) and J.M. Coetzee's novel *Foe* (1986). Each of these three writers - an American, an African American and a white South African - goes back to the foundation of the literary genre adopted, by revising the works and the biography of its pioneering author in the fictive space of the poem or novel in question. The historical characters dealt with are poets Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612-1672) and Phillis Wheatley (c. 1730-1821) - both of whom have been considered, respectively, as the first poets of American and African American literature - and Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), whose masterpiece, *Robinson Crusoe*, is generally regarded as the first example of the modern novel. Despite their stylistic differences, Berryman's and Hayden's poems allow us to hear Bradstreet's and Wheatley's voice speak in the first person. In Coetzee's novel, the character of Mr Foe is denied his role of "ultimate author" and is paired with would-be writer Susan Barton, who becomes his female alter(counter)-ego and the narrator of the story.

The revision of these groundbreaking authors and of their works can be thought of as a form of parodic novelisation. According to Simon Dentith, "novelisation can be used to describe the progressive relativisation of, and scepticism towards, the prestigious and sacred discourse of society"<sup>[1]</sup>. I will argue that novelisation allows our writers to perform a deconstruction of the myths surrounding these well-known personalities. In so doing, they also point out some strong cultural bias implicit in the legend of their literary fame. As in Jean-Paul Engélibert's reading of Derrida, the function of the author-character is to create a narrative process which deconstructs and criticize[s] a discourse 'from within the foreclosure' which defines it. Criticism, therefore, is an activity which is carried out not by examining an 'instance of truth which is interior, anterior, exterior or superior to this discourse', but is carried out according to the very rules of the discourse to be deconstructed, and its task is to indicate the 'gap' and thus to designate its limits. <sup>[2]</sup>

Despite the presence of obvious stylistic and thematic differences, all three of my authors go back to the very source of a strong dominant literary discourse and try to act upon it in a very similar way. Berryman plays with the Puritan *topoi* of the Virgin land and the renowned virtuousness of the woman poet; Hayden unveils the black poetess' double consciousness and her ironical views on the contradictions between Christianity and slavery; and Coetzee makes a parody out of the idyllic relationship between colonizer and colonized, as it is portrayed in Defoe's classic novel. In order to perform these tasks, all three authors have chosen a female character as subject, narrator and protagonist of their interpretation of the transatlantic journey and its cultural aftermaths. Berryman and Hayden somehow recover the bodily substance, the silenced life of the woman poet in Bradstreet and Wheatley, while Coetzee makes a female anti-heroine embody the Other/dark, silenced side of Crusoe's and Defoe's characters.

My argument is that these works redraft and revise these authors'/characters' femaleness with a (more or less) metaphorical intent: femaleness becomes the locus for marking the sign of the ambiguity and indecipherability of the unauthorized voices of history. According to this interpretation, we can read them as powerful counter-narratives of the traditional white, sexist and hegemonic discourse. In Hayden and Coetzee, in particular, the transatlantic journey is conceived as a two-way process, which on one hand imposed Western European culture on other continents, and on the other marked the progressive emergence of a subaltern discourse that challenged that very culture, thereby producing a new cultural hybrid.

Following these considerations, the main questions I will try to answer are: What are the results of the novelisation of these groundbreaking authors? What kinds of cultural and literary myths does this process of novelisation manage to deconstruct? Can we make any considerations about the representation of gender? In other words, what is the relationship between male authority and female narration? After discussing each text's peculiar take on these questions, I will carry out a comparative analysis to show their analogies and differences.

## 2. John Berryman's *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*

*I am a closet of secrets dying*<sup>[3]</sup>

The long poem "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet" - initially published in the *Partisan Review* in 1953, and then as a book in 1956 - was a pivotal work for John Berryman (1914-1972). This work made him a sort of national celebrity, along with two other American poets of that period, Robert Lowell and Randall Jarrell. Ironically, the poem contains a good dose of disillusion about the role of the poet and the value of poetry in 1950s America.

The poem has two narrative voices: that of the legendary Puritan poetess and that of Berryman himself. The two voices often intermingle and sometimes join in a trans-historical imaginary dialogue<sup>[4]</sup>, sometimes reaching the intimacy of a conversation between lovers. Why did Berryman choose to write a poem on the first recognized (woman) poet of the American literary tradition? What is the relation between the contemporary male poet and the Puritan female one? Does gender bear important consequences on the understanding of the text?

Interpretations of the more or less explicit intentions of this work have varied considerably over the years. The critics' focus initially ranged between the formal analysis of Berryman's text and its relationship to Berryman's life. More recently, scholars have relied on gender criticism to highlight the text's implicit reshaping of Bradstreet's works and its connection to the transatlantic experience.

The motif of the artist's alienation emerges from the early criticism. In the Fifties, Stanley Kunitz praised Berryman's "command of the stanzaic structure" and his noble intention, but judged the final result a kind of noble failure. He pointed out that "it is the life, the spirit, rather than the work, to which Berryman pays his homage. In a sense Anne Bradstreet prefigures 'the alienated poet', with whose image we are all too familiar in our time"<sup>[5]</sup>. In 1958 John Frederick Nims asserted, "he, the real poet, and she, so much manqué, are in the same melancholy barque, cast adrift by an unappreciative world"<sup>[6]</sup>. These statements are supported by Berryman himself at the very beginning of the poem, where he writes, "We are on each other's hands / who care. Both of our worlds unhand-ed us" (stanza 2). In a 1972 interview with Peter Stitt, Berryman said the following:

The idea was not to take Anne Bradstreet as a poetess – I was not interested in that. I was interested in her as a *pioneer heroine* [italics mine], a sort of mother to the artists and intellectuals who would follow her and play a large role in the development of the nation.<sup>[7]</sup>

Berryman's remark led some critics to explore the ambiguous relationship between his fictive ego and the character of the real Bradstreet. In the Eighties, critic John Bayley, judging *Homage* as "a very provisional kind of poem", observed that "Berryman's aim [was] to hold in opposed tension and full view the poet and his words [...] the *donnée* for Berryman there was the contrast between the woman as she presumably was, and the poems that she wrote [...] Why couldn't her poems be *her*, as he wills his to be him – the poem celebrates the gulf and the contrast".<sup>[8]</sup> As a result, the poem would definitively be about the unreliability of literary texts and their powerlessness in expressing life's complexities and the limits of any autobiographical writing. More recently, Luke Spencer (1994) has focused on "Berryman's intimate dialogue with Anne Bradstreet and the mutual sexual attraction", insisting on Berryman's patriarchal attempt to "colonize" and seduce a virtuous member of the Puritan community by turning her into his *mistress*. Spencer continues:

Although there are many moments of dramatic power, even empathy, in Berryman's treatment of a seventeenth-century Puritan woman's experience, there is also a current of feeling that seeks to colonize Anne Bradstreet as a 'mistress', with as much rhetorical insistence as Bradstreet's fellow (male) colonists established their authority over Massachusetts [...] [Berryman] was, however, pulled back and forth between a fellow feeling that respects the autonomy of the woman as subject and a patriarchal insecurity that must first attempt to possess the woman, then engineer her partial compliance, and finally have her pronounce absolution on him for his previous sexual misdemeanours.<sup>[9]</sup>

Spencer also accuses Berryman of completely dismissing the value of Bradstreet's poetry and quotes his peremptory judgement in stanza 12 ("mistress neither of fiery nor velvet verse"). However, this harsh-toned review is contrasted by Deanna Fernie (2003) in one of the latest studies on the poem. Exploring the transatlantic links between English seventeenth-century poetry and the American Puritan one as they appear in Berryman's re-interpretation of Bradstreet, the English scholar proposes a new reading of Bradstreet's representation in the poem. She argues that:

in portraying the link to the great poetry of England as a weak one, *Homage* raises questions about Berryman's perception of his status as a poet, and the enterprise of the poet in an America of the fifties. *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* brings into view Bradstreet's aesthetic struggle to un-mesh herself from the 'fine spun' poetry of England and Europe. [...] For it is precisely the lack of mellifluousness that distinguishes Bradstreet's poetry [...] *Homage* evokes her working out a relationship to tradition that Berryman himself was doing at a later date. It is this element of resistance that comes across in Berryman's portrayal of Mistress Bradstreet. [...] Reading Berryman's *Homage* in the context of Bradstreet's own 'homages' suggests that Bradstreet's lack of continuity with her heritage was a deliberate break on her part, even if it was inspired by a sense of falling short.<sup>[10]</sup>

According to Fernie, the Bradstreet-character becomes much more than a mere symbol of Berryman's displacement or the object of his sexual temptations. Her life as well as her work become an active "element of resistance" which would allow future poets to develop a new consciousness about their role in America. As Fernie points out:

It is not so much Bradstreet's place within a tradition that draws Berryman, however, but the difficulty of carving out a place for herself that her poetry indicates. The difficulty in accepting one's status as poet pre-occupies American poets to a greater extent than others, and perhaps justifies, more than for any other reason, Bradstreet's place at the starting line of American poetry [...] Her stern image provides a type of the 'self-discipline' (*Life*, 253) that, if not in his personal life, Berryman sought in his art [...] Her capacity to 'utter' is presented as a constant against the gutterings of his candle.<sup>[11]</sup>

Fernie's reference to the concluding stanzas of the poem indicates the strong intellectual link that Berryman felt towards the Puritan poetess, who, like him, "suffered living like stain" (stanza 33). What drives the two spirits together is not a perverse form of lust but the consonance of their thought and their nature. This affirmation is supported by the fact that their voices sometimes become indistinguishable. That is why, at the end of stanza 32, the poetess exclaims, "sing a concord of our thought".

According to Berryman himself, the aim of his poem was to show the contrast between the Puritan poetess, as she lived historically, and the poems she wrote. "I decided to tempt her", he told Peter Stitt (34); "she was unbelievably devoted to her husband". His purpose, however, is not to show the perversion behind an honest façade, rather he wants to recover a more human image of the great poetess. American novelist Saul Bellow described the poem as "the equivalent of a 500-page psychological novel"<sup>[12]</sup>. Her psychological ruminations that are given throughout the poem testify against a tradition that depicted her according to the myth of the virtuous woman. Berryman tempts her in order to recover that rebelliousness which may have been the characteristic trait of her soul. He observed that all colonial settlements are intensely conservative, *except* in the initial break-off point (whether religious, political, legal, or whatever). [...] The poem laid itself out in a series of rebellions. I had [Bradstreet] rebel first against the new environment and above all against her barrenness, then against her marriage, and finally against her continuing life of illness, loss, and age. [...] Each rebellion, of course, is succeeded by submission, although even in the moment of the

poem's supreme triumph – the presentment, too long to quote now, of the birth of her first child – rebellion survives. [\[13\]](#)

The stanzas describing Bradstreet's trials of childbearing (17-22) represent the very core of the poem. According to Berryman's biographer John Haffenden [\[14\]](#), "He seemed to be trying to understand, as clearly as possible, *exactly* what a woman went through, both physically and psychologically in the course of giving birth – every step of the way". Why was Berryman so interested in giving such a detailed psychological account of the poetess' pregnancy? There's a strong feeling of unease which permeates the text from the very first stanzas, resulting both from the pioneer's restlessness and her long wait for something mysterious to happen ("Why then do I repine, sick, bad, to long / after what must not be? I lie wrong / once more", stanza 13).

I would argue here that Bradstreet's transatlantic crossing also is conceived as a kind of "poetical pregnancy". The birth of her first child expresses the miracle of a new poetry, giving voice to her new life on the "new" continent. With this poem Berryman began his endless search for new aesthetic paradigms capable of representing the complexity of reality. What he saw in Bradstreet's strong *exemplum* was probably that very state of mind which he needed to renew for himself and for his own career as a poet. [\[15\]](#)

In this context, Berryman's interest in recovering the poetess' body follows a very contemporary trend. According to critic John Fredrick Nims: "the poet's passion for the body of his poetess is strange [...], he prefers to dwell on physical aspects not normally the object of desire: her disease, her "cratered" skin, the cracking vertebrae, 'wretched trap', and unruly colon of her childbed experience, her retchings, her brooding..." (121). Berryman's insistent focus on Bradstreet's body can be read indeed as a way to recover that rebellious (deeply female) side of her life, which was deliberately silenced by the patriarchal literary tradition ("drench & powerful, I did it with my body! / One proud tug greens Heaven. Marvelous, / unforbidding Majesty [...] Mountainous, woman not breaks and will bend: / sways God nearby: anguish comes to an end.", stanza 21). Ultimately, we could say that Berryman gets us to recognize the mother of American poetry as a fully rounded character and a woman made of flesh and blood. Her character embodies both the restlessness ("Pioneering is not feeling well", stanza 23) and the contradictory liberty ("More in some ways I feel at a loss, / freer", stanza 22) that characterise the American literary tradition.

### 3. Robert Hayden's "A Letter From Phillis Wheatley"

*Alas, there is / no Eden without its Serpent.* [\[16\]](#)

"A Letter from Phillis Wheatley" is one of Robert Hayden's (1913-1980) remarkable poetical portraits of African American (anti-) heroes, along with those of the legendary figure Frederick Douglass ("Frederick Douglass"), the slave leader Cinquez ("Middle Passage"), and blues singer Bessie Smith ("Homage to the Empress of the Blues"). Phillis Wheatley has been celebrated as the very first poet and the mother of African American literature. As an independent thinker, she has also been considered a precursor of the abolitionist movement. According to critic Fred Fetrow, in this poem Hayden uses a highly original technique in the creation of what he called a this first recognized American black poet within her historical-cultural context. Inspired by a letter that Wheatley actually wrote from England to her friend Obour Tanner in 1773, the poem derives its verisimilitude from Hayden's imitation of Wheatley's creation of vocal cadence, latinized diction, and a plausible "style." [\[17\]](#)

Hayden chooses to narrativize Wheatley in a very specific moment of her lifetime. In 1773, the poetess was accompanied to England by Nathaniel Wheatley, her master's son, in order to arrange the publication of some of her poems. As a result, her book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published in the same year. Hayden's poem goes back to this episode to investigate the contradictory relationship between the black poet and her white audience. What was Wheatley forced to hide in her poems? What was the price she had to pay for getting white people's attention? What do the expressions "Yankee Pedlar" and "Cannibal Mockingbird" mean? By playing with the

poetess' historical figure, Hayden gives the Wheatley character the opportunity to unmask the racist feelings which characterized the eighteenth century society and literary establishment.

The poem's six stanzas isolate distinctive themes: Wheatley's religious faith and the comparison between her "uneventful crossing" and the Middle Passage (vv.1-7); the paternalistic tone of Lady Hutchinson's "illustrious friends" and their denial of Phillis' double-identity as both African and American (vv.8-11); the theme of slavery in the household and that of "captive Royalty" ("I thought of Pocahontas", vv.12-21); the subaltern's view of the centre of the Empire versus white people's blindness to blacks' double-consciousness (vv.22-44). According to Fred Fetrow:

the resultant poem abounds in irony. Its drama grows out of disparities between those ironies Wheatley notes and those that are lost on her, but not the reader. For example, she mentions the ironic contrast between her recent uneventful ocean crossing and the earlier westward crossing as a slave, but it is the reader who senses the irony in her assumption that her "destined voyage" was God-willed. [18]

Irony is the main device that Hayden uses to address all the misunderstandings surrounding Wheatley. In the second stanza she acknowledges her mistaken identity: she is neither American nor an African anymore, and she gives up the thought of sharing her desire for a better life after death ("I scarce could tell them anything / of Africa, though much of Boston / and my hope of Heaven"). After her reading, the poetess holds back her tears "as is [her] wont" and this contrasts sharply with her hosts' superficial feelings. How could they cry for her poems while they kept her as a slave? Hayden emphasizes Wheatley's soberness ("Nocturnal [=black] Mood") and portrays her as a fine observer of the senseless discrepancy between art and life that characterizes white people's culture. In this context, Hayden's poem also could be read as a rewriting of Wheatley's famous "On Being Brought From Africa To America"[19] (1773), where Wheatley criticizes the contradiction between racism and Christian prejudice and claims the equality of all humankind before God[20].

Although Hayden makes no specific remarks on Wheatley's womanhood here, the poem contrasts the sisterly friendship between Phillis and her friend Obour Tanner ("I would not share with any save / your trusted Self." Vv. 41-42) to the superficial relation between the black poetess and the Countess. At the same time, in stanza 4, Hayden sets the serious, unadorned presence of the poetess' body (her delicate health) against the "foppish would-be wigs" of the rich. In so doing, he unmasks the falsehood lying behind white people's apparent benevolence ("Idyllic England! Alas, there is / no Eden without its Serpent. Under / the chiming Complaisance I hear him Hiss;" vv.32.35).

I would like to suggest here that Hayden interprets Wheatley's double identity (African/American, slave/poet, etc.) as a visionary conduit, which allows her to understand the subtleties and the duplicity of what happens around her. Hayden's representation of Wheatley gives us a fuller portrait of the poet's humanity and denounces the hostility of the world that surrounds her.

According to Fetrow:

Hayden's Hayden fully realizes his subject with her closing anecdote about an incident she considers "Satan's best disguise" of the appreciation of life's lighter ironies also, as shown by her amusement at being asked by a blackened young British chimney sweep, "Does you, M'lady, sweep chimneys too?" [21]

Wheatley's humanization is achieved by including her appreciation of "life's lighter ironies". Quoting W.E. Du Bois's famous observation, I would also argue that it is indeed her double-consciousness that allows her to perceive irony without self-transformation (master) cannot, largely because he is free and white. In the poem, Nathaniel is also referred to as a "Yankee Pedlar" because he tries to "sell" a dream (a *black* poet) which the dominant establishment cannot but mimic.

The poem's ironic images are also used to address the theme of black creativity. The nickname "Cannibal Mockingbird" refers to a common prejudice, which held that black writing was merely a worthless imitation of what

white people wrote. Blacks weren't supposed to have the gift of poetry because poetry was considered one of the highest achievements of Western culture. Hayden questions this racist vision by re-establishing and celebrating Wheatley's artistic value.

Wheatley's double consciousness allows her to deconstruct the unyielding dualities of Western culture, and Hayden's ironical reworking of her story as that of the first African American poet can thus be considered as an attempt to establish doubleness as the fundamental motif of African American literature.

#### 4. J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*

Published in 1986 by South African Coetzee, *Foe* is a rewriting and a parody of Daniel Defoe's classic *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). As Simon Dentith points out, parody can be defined as "one of the principal formal means which carries forward [the] process of novelisation" [22]. As already mentioned, novelization consists in a "progressive relativisation of, and scepticism towards, the prestigious and sacred discourse of society" [23]. According to several critics [24], Coetzee's text is designed to deconstruct those dominant discourses which are implicit in Defoe's eighteenth-century classic and which still condition current cultural and literary debates.

As a parody of "the Text" which established the myth of colonization as Europe's act of benevolent paternalism towards underdeveloped countries, the novel addresses issues like the establishing of an authoritative literary canon and the relationship between colonizer and colonized. According to Patrick Corcoran, "it is a novel to be placed fairly and squarely in a postcolonial line of reflection, a text haunted, if not obsessed, with notions of power, authority and ownership." [25]

Mostly written in an epistolary form, *Foe* undoes the self-centred, monolithic unity which distinguished Defoe's text. As Jean-Paul Engélibert argues, this rewriting "place[s] the character in an intertext rather than in a context. For [it] reinscribe[s] *Robinson Crusoe* into the totality of discourses which are contemporaneous with it" (272). This process of intertextualization is carried out through a series of literary expedients. First of all, Coetzee narrativizes Defoe and puts him into *Foe*'s fictive space along with other characters that Defoe himself invented for *Robinson Crusoe* and other novels. Then he introduces as narrator the character of Susan Barton [26], the female alter-ego of Crusoe, Defoe and himself. This allows Coetzee to put metatextual references into the book and to play with Defoe's ultimate authority in the story. Coetzee also re-inverts the setting of Defoe's novel by focusing mainly on Susan's and Friday's journey to England and their stay there. Their adventures become symmetrical to Crusoe's and Friday's on the island.

What are the myths Coetzee is trying to deconstruct? In Defoe's novel the human image is limited. Crusoe's is a man's world; women appear only sporadically as minor characters. As Ian A. Bell points out:

Crusoe's remarkable lack of erotic urges and sexual fantasies during his twenty-eight years of isolation can be seen as one of the most curious of incidents in nearly ten thousand night-times, inviting speculation, scholarly commentary and perhaps even a little amusement. [...] Women, it seems, are simply not to be involved in the substance or the central episodes of the adventure narrative as they are prioritised and delivered. Crusoe's story is overwhelmingly an account of male experience, or at least of the strange surprising experience of a particular male – the narrator is made to represent the ordinary man placed in the most extraordinary circumstances, and his story is one of remarkable events happening to a typical man, which are prepared for and told to an interested audience of men. [27]

Coetzee's *Foe*, on the contrary, makes up for these restrictions. It tells a woman's story, and lets her decide the terms on which it is to be organized. In so doing, Susan questions not only the other characters but also meaning itself. According to Corcoran, "Susan Barton's arrival on the island is an occasion for reflection on fictional stereotypes and how they compare with reality – a reality which is itself, of course, a fictional creation" [28].

Susan's difficult relationship with the two male protagonists suggests both her powerlessness and her desire to rebel against the given patriarchal authority over her story. At first Susan says she is Crusoe's second subject, thereby

reiterating the conventional power relationship of her time, but later she comes to doubt its absolute value (51). She progressively undoes the paternalist hierarchy of society because her character is strong, independent, and enjoys free sexual expression. As Spivak[29] notes, Susan also wants to “father” her story into history with Mr. Foe’s help. At the beginning she doesn’t feel able to accomplish it and she seems to accept the values of patriarchal aesthetics. (“A liveliness is lost in writing down which must be supplied by art, and I have no art”, 40).

Being both the storyteller and the object of her story, her sense of identity is challenged: “When I reflect on my story I seem to exist only as the one who came, the one who witnessed, the one who longed to be gone: a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso. Is that the fate of all storytellers? Yet I was as much a body as Cruso”(51). She thus entrusts Foe with the duty to give her back the wholeness of her identity (“Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr. Foe: that is my entreaty”, 51).

Deeply disillusioned by Foe’s attempt to change her story, Susan seeks a reversal of roles, which is mirrored in her sexual act with the renowned writer: Susan becomes the manly figure who gives her story to Foe. She says to him, “Am I to think of you as a whore for welcoming me and embracing me and receiving my story? You gave me a home when I had none. I think of you as a mistress, or even, if I dare to speak the word, as a wife” (152). Susan wants to reverse the myth of the female Muse who visits male poets and begets their work, depicting herself both as the Muse and the begetter of her story.

By refusing to recognize the girl Foe sends her as her daughter, Susan implicitly refuses to accept a narrative, which is not hers and finally rebels against the authoritative voice. She tells the girl, “You are father-born. You have no mother. The pain you feel is the pain of lack, not the pain of loss. What you hope to regain in my person you have in truth never had.” (91). At the same time, however, she cannot but use the symbolic means of her male counterpart and “father” her story.

Susan hopes to achieve a substantiality that the written text cannot or fails to provide. Her hope to escape from the “cage of words” is handed over to her runaway daughter. The certainty resting on her motherhood is arguably her most powerful argument against Foe’s subtle tricks. When asked by Foe to make up the story of her stay in Bahia, she strongly refuses:

“How can you ever close Bahia between the covers of a book? It is only small and thinly peopled places that can be subjugated and held down in words, such as desert islands and lonely house. Besides, my daughter is no longer in Bahia but is gone into the interior, into a world so vast and strange I can hardly conceive it, a world of plains and plantations such as the one Cruso left behind, where the ant is emperor and everything is turned on its head” (122-123)

Susan partly identifies with her daughter, who has successfully escaped the dominant discourse by entering a world “so vast” that papers cannot map it. That basically is her only consolation in a world which seems to have lost its measure for truth and reality.

Susan’s obsession with the two dimensions of her story (textual and material) is mirrored in her relationship with Friday. Her reaction to Friday’s mutilation (which can be also read as a form of sexual castration) can also be read as a response to her own inability to speak. In a conversation with Mr. Foe, Susan says “Friday has grown to be my shadow” (115); and later, “The shadow [...] is the loss of Friday’s tongue” (117).

However, as Spivak has pointed out, Friday’s silence cannot be intended as a symbol of the woman’s failure to speak. They are both subalterns, but they cannot be reduced to each other and to each other’s way of “speaking” for themselves. Susan is prevented from becoming subversive in the way Friday has become because she is *not* black. Coetzee bestows on her a task that she cannot accomplish, because she is both excluded from and belongs to the symbolic order of Western culture. [30]

Whereas Friday is depicted as capable of signifying outside the structures of language[31], Susan is trapped within the compulsion to conform to the authoritative mode of the male writer, be it Foe or Coetzee himself. Her act of rebellion

keeps her suspended between two worlds, in a space that keeps her guessing. Her search for her daughter (whom she does not find) is a symbol of her own continuous quest. As Corcoran points out, the novel does not end with final statements about the reality of the events. Instead, it seems to suggest that we are all involved in story telling, constantly narrating our own and others' lives to ourselves and to others; this activity is the way we maintain a handle on the world and exercise power within it. It is therefore totally appropriate that the dreamlike quality of the fourth and final section should seem consciously to blur distinctions of time, space and person in order to hand over to the reader the responsibility for making sense of the text, and giving or refusing substance to the ghosts that inhabit it.<sup>[32]</sup>

## 5. Comparative Analysis and Conclusion

Despite their undeniable peculiarities, the three texts I have analysed question the dominant presuppositions on the transatlantic journey and its literary impact and seek to recover a series of silenced acts of rebellion against cultural and social forms of control. The characters of Bradstreet, Wheatley and Barton can all be considered as allegorical expressions of the rebel artist who tries to make her/his voice heard in a fundamentally repressive environment. Indeed, rebellion is located at the very root of the transatlantic journey. The three characters have been profoundly marked by their oceanic crossing and can never recover their original identity. It is up to them to discover a new form of being-in-the-world, which cannot but be initially perceived as a form of negation (*not* English, *not* African, then what?).

The parodic rewriting of ground-breaking authors such as Bradstreet, Wheatley and Defoe allows Berryman, Hayden and Coetzee to deconstruct and reconstruct the basic narrative of their own literary tradition, the (white) American, the African American, and the English (South-African) ones. Theirs is a concerted attempt to go back to the origins of a given literary genre and see what portions of reality have been selectively silenced by the dominant discourses, which still weigh on their own socio-cultural history.

~~Noted of all, the main emphasis on problems related to gender has~~  
the possibility to be completely in control of her work. Rather, they all suffer from the superficial patronage of their contemporaries, whether they be renowned male literati (in Bradstreet's and Barton's case) and/or members of the white leisure class (in the case of Wheatley). Berryman and Hayden focus on the exploration of Bradstreet's and Wheatley's inner psychology, respectively, in order to recover the silenced elements of their experience, which could not be made clear in the writings they left behind them. Coetzee plays with Defoe's male authority, making up the character of Barton, who represents a sort of splitting and a mimicking of Defoe's historical character. What if the real author and protagonist of the story we know as *Robinson Crusoe* were a woman, Coetzee implicitly asks the reader. The ambiguity of these female characters' distorted (or fictively denied) celebrity allows these contemporary writers to reflect on the theme of authority and power relations in the literary world.

Whereas Hayden seems to insist more on Wheatley's racial identity than on her gender (she is de-gendered and 'universalized' as an emblem of *the* black poet), Berryman and Coetzee clearly address the gender of their characters as a primary goal. In their respective works, the truthfulness of male authority resting on traditional public discourse is directly questioned by the introduction of a private sphere, which is exquisitely female. Moreover, the stylistic choice of the epistolary form in Hayden and Coetzee, and of the dream-like dialogue in Berryman aims at giving these figures a voice they could not have had in their own historical context. Extending what Fernie<sup>[33]</sup> pointed out about Berryman's *Homage*, we could say that the "voice itself becomes a central subject" in the three works I have discussed above. In the end, we have three different results emerging from this deconstruction of the unitary speaking subject: the unravelling doubleness which characterizes the narrating voice in Berryman; the presence of double-consciousness in Hayden; and the process of indetermination of the truthful version in Coetzee.

Secondly, for very similar reasons, all three writers explore the relation between the artist and her body. What these writers are interested in is to position gendered bodies beyond the power of the words and the symbolic order of patriarchy. The body, conceived as the ultimate site of difference and subalternity (as *not* male or/and *not* white), is also a powerful means to speak against the same order of oppression. While, for Hayden, Wheatley's blackness is a

rather obvious topic, Berryman's interest in Bradstreet's female body as a site of rebellion presents us with a position that is very much ahead of his times. In Coetzee's text, Susan Barton constantly reflects on her physical relations with Defoe, Crusoe and above all with Friday, who represents the most powerful allegorical expression of the "alternative voice" of *the* different body in the novel.

Thirdly, Berryman and Coetzee's focus on their characters' motherhood is another powerful means to represent their attempt to link gender and body issues in one site. As a mother, Susan Barton clearly distinguishes between father-born and mother-born beings, that is, beings that have a merely linguistic, "symbolic" existence and others that exist for real (that have been born out of her body). As if she were borrowing from Julia Kristeva, Susan's real daughter expresses the joyous liberty of the semiotic sphere in contrast to the repression of the symbolic in male writing. In *Foe*, however, Susan's daughter is not locatable, just as Susan cannot find a way to locate her own semiotic existence in the written page. On the contrary, Berryman addresses Bradstreet's motherhood in a more optimistic way. As I have already suggested, he makes a metaphor out of the poetess' labour, which then comes to stand for the difficult birth of a new kind of poetry in America. Her first delivery bears the mark of a rebellion against the status quo. Bradstreet's poetical inspiration, deriving from her physical and psychological labour in a largely hostile environment, is conceived as a spiritual heritage for the future generations of American poets.

As we have seen, manipulation and doubleness, depicted as a constant clash between appearance and reality, are indeed primary issues in the three works. The transatlantic journey itself is deconstructed and reversed in Hayden's and Coetzee's texts. The journeys to England of the couples Susan/Friday and Nathaniel/Wheatley show some striking similarities. In the first couple we have an English woman travelling with a mute black man; in the second we have a young American man travelling with a black poetess. Susan carries around Friday's silence, while Nathaniel 'sells' Phillis' misunderstood voice. As a parody of the colonizer's idyllic journey towards the land of his conquests, this journey back to the centre of empire allows the reader to reflect on racial and gendered misunderstandings and prejudices. In the mainland, things are not what they seem: Susan and Friday are believed to be gypsies, while Phillis is mistaken for a chimney sweep.

In the end, these three texts constitute a powerful re-reading of the transatlantic journey by linking it to a number of very urgent contemporary issues. This paper has tried to show how these works can be used to question the postmodernist idea of the tyranny of texts by discovering "other" forms of substantiality. By portraying the character of the artist as a significant journeying "Other" (*not man, not white, not free*), these three writers reaffirm the centrality of the transatlantic paradigm in redefining a cultural history that can no longer be perceived merely as Western, white and male.

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[1] Dentith, Simon, *Parody*, London: Routledge, 2000, p.193.

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[3] Berryman, John, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1956) Italian edition by Sergio Perosa, *Omaggio a Mistress Bradstreet* , Torino: Einaudi, 1969, p.75.

[4] This work anticipates Berryman's characteristic adoption of alter egos whose voices often flow into one another in a single poem (see *The Dream Songs*).

[5] Kunitz, Stanley, "No Middle Flight: Berryman's *Homage To Mistress Bradstreet*", *Poetry*, 90 (July 1957): pp.244-49 in Thomas, Harry (ed.) *Berryman's Understanding : Reflections on the Poetry of John Berryman* Boston: Boston University Press, 1988, pp.110-116.

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[9] Spencer, Luke, "Mistress Bradstreet and Mr. Berryman: The Ultimate Seduction" in *American Literature*, Vol. 66 June 1994, 353-366, p.323.

[10] Fernie, Deanna, "The Difficult Homages of Berryman and Bradstreet" in *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, Vol. 7.1, April 2003, 11-34, pp.19-20.

[11] Ibidem, p.30.

[12] Stitt, p. 35.

[13] Baym, N. et al. (eds), "John Berryman" in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature Vol. 2*, New York: Norton, 1998, pp. 128-130.

[14] Haffenden, John, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary*, London: Macmillan, 1980, p.23-24.

[15] Berryman expands this concordance of thought further. In stanza 42, he seems to introduce Bradstreet's awareness of an editorial misunderstanding as he powerfully contrasts Bradstreet's "proportioned" and apparently worthless ("for a hollow crown") poems to the pomposity and the brutality[15] of the English capital, where her poems were published.

[16] Hayden, Robert, "A Letter from Phillis Wheatley", vv. 32-33, in Gates, Henry Louis Jr. (eds) , *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, New York: Norton, 1998, p. 1514.

[17] Fetrow, Fred M., *Robert Hayden*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1984 in [http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g\\_l/hayden/wheatley.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hayden/wheatley.htm)

[18] Ibidem.

[19] 'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land

Taught my benighted soul to understand

That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:

Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

Some view our sable race with scornful eye

"Their colour is a diabolic die."

Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,

May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train. (1773)

[20]The lines describing her exclusion from sitting at the table with her hosts also echo one of Langston Hughes' famous poems, "I, too, Sing America", where the Harlem Renaissance poet writes I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed--

I, too, am America...

[21] Ibidem.

[22] Dentith, Simon, *Parody*, London: Routledge, 2000, p.193.

[23] Ibidem.

[24] For example see Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, "Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* Reading Defoe's *Crusoe/Roxana*", in Arac, Jonathan & Johnson, Barbara (eds) *Consequences of Theory*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

[25] Corcoran, Patrick, "*Foe*: Metafiction and the Discourse of Power" in Spaas, Lieve and Stimpson, Brian, *Robinson Crusoe : myths and metamorphoses*, Basingstoke; London : Macmillan, 1996, 256-266, p. 256.

[26] Susan Barton is also the protagonist of Defoe's novel *Roxana* (1724) whose first name is Susan[26]. The story of Roxana centers on the figure of this woman in search of self affirmation and economic security in the modern world whose main feature is insecurity and constant change. Roxana reacts to the failure of her wedding choosing to become a courtesan without any moral restriction. There are analogies here between Coetzee's Susan and Defoe's Roxana: both experience poverty and see the world from a subaltern position.

[27] Bell, Ian A., "Crusoe's Women" in Spaas, Lieve and Stimpson, Brian, *Robinson Crusoe : myths and metamorphoses*, Basingstoke; London : Macmillan, 1996, p. 29-30.

[28] Corcoran, p.29-30.

[29] from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* reading Defoe's *Crusoe/Roxana*', in *Consequences of Theory: Selected Papers of the English Institute, 1987-88* New Series, no. 14, ed. Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson ( Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1991, pp. 154-80.)

[30] Although her tongue remains intact, she too has problems in taking part in the symbolic order. In a novel where writing in general and representation in particular are viewed as authoritative processes, her efforts to become an independent woman writer appear to be particularly hopeless.

[31] There is a long list of literary works using silence as a metaphor for black people's exclusion from the symbolic order. See, for example, Hayden's poem "Middle Passage" or Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno".

[32] Corcoran, p.265.

[33] Fernie, Deanna, "The Difficult Homages of Berryman and Bradstreet" in *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, Vol. 7.1, April 2003, 11-34, p.16.