CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION
Having made an analysis of the major poetic works of John Berryman in the preceding chapters, we note that alienation emerges as the most dominant theme of his poetry. Berryman has depicted in depth human estrangement, leaving it for us to choose between regression or progression, between animalistic existence or a humanistic one. To be man or not to be one, is the crucial question and its answer holds the key to the problem of integration and alienation.

The problem, however, is not so easy to solve; it is rather one of the most problematic human problems. The perennial river of alienation has continuously been flowing since the human existence, and the present century seems to be the hey-day of alienation. In the present world man has to suffer from one type of alienation or the other. Not to be alien today, it seems is the denial of the very existence. It would be better to say with Confucius and Socrates: "Life without estrangement in scarcely worth living; what matters is to increase men's capacity to cope with alienation."\(^1\)

Alienation is not always harmful; it may be sometimes developmentally important, sometimes morally or metaphysically undesirable, sometimes psychologically harmful, sometimes socially disruptive, sometimes personally unpleasant, and sometimes sources of insight. But in Berryman's case, as the preceding chapters show, alienation seems to have been totally disruptive, resulting in denial of happiness.

Berryman, however, did not accept the pain of alienation without protesting against this central phenomenon of human crisis. One might think that if a person is alienated from 'self' he must not suffer from other painful types of alienation. But Berryman was very much involved in world-affairs and was necessarily not alienated from his self. Had he been merely self-alienated, he would not have suffered the other drastic kinds of alienation.

Instead, Berryman tried to solve the problem. Before dealing with his efforts, we must know the root cause of his being alienated. The genesis of the problem may be traced back to his father's premature death by committing suicide in front of his son's window when he was only
twelve. The sound of the gunshot that killed his father haunted Berryman throughout his life. His feelings over the death of his father were never assuaged:

He believed that he had gone through an agony of grief after his father's death, but it seems probable that his mother and other kin grievously agitated and confused his natural feelings.... Later in life Berryman believed that he had been stunned by his loss, and took it as the point d'appui of his psychological problems. Convinced that his father's self-serving action had broken his own peace of mind, he swung between compassion and loathing far the man.

Berryman felt a need to denounce his father for dying; he spat on his father's grave, and tried to dig up the grave and rekill his father in a fit of anger. It was his father's cowardice that helped make Berryman an unstable (he could not stick to a particular job for a long duration), insecure adult who always desired for his own death and felt painfully

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2 At about this time, both his father and mother had become romantically involved with other parties. His mother filed for divorce, and the day the divorce was to be granted, his father committed the 'bloody-act' of committing suicide.

alienated from others.

It must be due to the horrible impact of his father's suicide on Berryman that his malicious and inquisitional feelings towards his father were also reserved for the Heavenly Father, manifested in Christ and the Catholic Church, his father's faith, which culminated in his religious alienation. Religious alienation of Berryman also resulted from his feeling that people are suffering isolation and perpetual atrocities are being perpetrated on the poor alienated beings by an unseen hand. The hand must be of that the 'dark' God, whom he regards as his arch-enemy. Berryman denied even the resurrection of Christ, and his views concerning heaven, hell, life, death, after-life and God are violent and contrary to the well-established theological principles.

Another cause of Berryman's being alienated from his religion and God may be that he always wanted to live with this world and never to be an alien in this world. It is this feeling that made him reject religion and God simply because to become one with God one has to be detached from worldly things and affairs. Almost all religions of the world lay emphasis on total
detachment (Is not it the beginning of a kind of alienation from others?), estranging their disciples from nature, from society, from their own bodies and from whatever they might consider their own. One is asked to detach oneself altogether from this whole world and recognize only the sole ultimate reality that transcends all individuality.

Berryman did not want to withdraw or detach himself from the worldly affairs and his efforts to be alienated from religion and God must be seen as his first attempt to get rid of other kinds of alienations. But this effort having failed, Berryman had to seek other solutions for the problem. Homosexuality, adopted to console the pain of alienation, kept him away from other activities. But it was a temporary solution for the problem because almost all the friends whom he loved "excessively" departed one by one, making his sense of loss more acute than ever before. The result was that he had an unsatisfied married life with no less than three wives, all of whom continuously suspected him. Throughout his mature period, he and his homosexual friends, specially Delmore, provided for one another the consolation that there were others in the world who felt exactly the same way. And so when
his friends started to die off, Berryman reacted with a degree of pain and horror far beyond what might have been expected. The poems he wrote in their remembrance are not stately elegies along the lines of Lycidas or Adonais but tortured cries of pain born of the poet's knowledge that he has lost a rare soulmate. Moreover, each poem reflects the poet's fear that his friends' horrid deaths forebode his own. The passings made Berryman's world more alien and hostile than ever.

Berryman's next effort to get rid of alienation by making friends also failed. Friendship was very important to him and he really was lucky to have fine friends. But he was crushed by Jarrell's suicide, which inspired "Dream Song 90", wherein the poet pleads with himself to stop his self-torture over Jarrell's death, and notes that he also is "headed west". The poem is one of Berryman's Opus Posthumous songs, published not after his death but after Jarrell's. Indeed, in a Dream Song written about Jarrell's death, Berryman says that the air is full of the souls of dead, among whom hangols one soul, not yet

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dead but which "refuses to come home". Berryman seems to be saying that the souls including Jarrell's, linger, and that his own soul, as always with Jarrell's, is loath to return to his now empty shell. With Jarrell's death not only has Jarrell's soul departed, but Berryman's as well. Not yet dead, Berryman painfully notes that his soul already shuns life.

It was the death of his alcoholic friend Delmore that caused the bitterest impact on Berryman's sense of alienation. He, on his part, wrote no fewer than fourteen Dream Songs in Delmore Schwartz's memory. In the most beautiful of these, "Dream Song 147", Schwartz's death has left his mind blank, his life broken, his love nearly dead, and "the world ... lunatic". Schwartz's death, it is clear from this elegy, has intensified the poet's sense of alienation. The world is now uglier, disgusting, and more inhospitable than ever. "This is the last ride", he cries, and so sharp is the pain that one senses that Berryman has moved through death with Schwartz.

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5 Berryman, "Dream Song 127", His Toy, No. 24.
6 "Dream Song 147", in His Toy, No. 76.
So powerful was the poet's need of friendship that when his friends began to die off, he began to feel increasingly out of place in the world, and felt his own death to be perilously near. Indeed, in addition to everything else that contributed to Berryman's early death, this factor should also be seriously considered.

Another solution which was thought to be appropriate for getting rid of alienation was fame. The simple truth is that Berryman craved for fame because he felt it would deliver him from alienation. It would, he hoped, make him a part of the world of his country and his culture and would give him identity. One of Berryman's *Dream Songs* recalls a time in the early forties when he and Schwartz waited for celebrity to descend upon them "and tell us who we are."7 Berryman, in his later years, did receive recognition, but for the successful poet fame, once achieved, seemed to have lost its importance; and he writes in "Dream Song 133", "ah, but what is fame?" Certainly, fame did not bring to the poet any greater sense of belonging. The sense of alienation that haunted him in his days of obscurity remained with him, as his biography shows, also in his years of renown. 'Light

7"Dream Song 152", in *His Toy*, No. 81.
of Knowledge' seems to have been thought of another solution. Throughout his life Berryman attempted to vanquish the sense of alienation by seeking the light of knowledge. In order to achieve a profound perception into the meaning of life which he craved for, the poet was willing to suffer greatly. In fact, he felt that in order to understand the pain of life, one must live with a continuous and intense awareness of pain. One has to live, in other words, at the edge; and only by suffering could one write great poetry. Berryman, himself, said: "The poet has got to know pain".  

In a sense, Berryman's hunger for knowledge was nothing more than a wish to find God. But his life-long quest for God could also not solve his puzzle. No miracle took place: the clouds did not open; the Angel of Truth did not descend from heaven; God never stood up and said, "Here I am". The poet remained alienated.

'Dreams' are yet another step Berryman tried to overcome the tyranny of alienation. To him dreams

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represented two things: First, it is in dreams that one's true feelings about waking life come closest to the surface. Ideally, if one understands one's dreams completely, one would understand oneself completely. Thus dreams were an important hunting ground in Berryman's quest for knowledge. Each dream song reflects the dreamer's feeling of alienation, of loss and of persecution. Secondly, dreams were important for Berryman as they acted as a mode of wish-fulfillments. They presented a version of life more pleasant than that which the dreamer encounters during his waking hours.

For Berryman, to whom life meant primarily pain and alienation, dreams were doubly attractive; in dreams he could find not only knowledge, an explanation of the tortures that wracked his mind, but also a temporary escape from those tortures into another world far more to his liking. "In dreams," writes Suzanne Ferguson, "... characters compensate for the pain and loneliness of their waking lives."  

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dream. Berryman, in one of his *Dream Songs* describes moments of happiness with a child as "a small dream of the Golden World" which intrudes upon the unpleasantness of the real world. In another Dream Song an interlude spent in the pages of an "Old French Story" is like a dream from which Henry, Berryman's alter ego, awakens to face "the wicked ordinary day". Thus "dream" refers to any experience that constituted an exception to the alienation and unhappiness of the poet's waking life.

Berryman refers to the conscious hours of his life as a "waking dream", waking hours being merely an interlude of pain. But to regard life as meaningless and dreams as the only reality is close to a death wish. And indeed, a number of Berryman's poems see death as desirable, as something that is awakened to from the nightmare of life. Berryman once identified Mr. Bones of *The Dream Songs* as "Death, Henry's friend - who at the time end takes him onstage."¹⁰ So intensified was the poet's sense of alienation that he made death his bosom-friend! To him every moment of life was suffused with death.

The last effort of Berryman's to get rid of the feeling of alienation was through love. Desperate for an escape from his pathological sense of isolation, he made unreasonable demands on love. One of his Dream Songs begins with the words "love me" repeated five times. Berryman seems to have believed in the established view that the unity between the individuals and the world can be attained only through love, which is said to exclude all oppositions and to demand complete surrender. He continuously felt that he needed love to escape a life of alienation, in which night would soon arrive, cold and desolate, "Unless Love build its city".

Love, however, was no more effective a salve for the poet's psychic wounds as it had lost all its meaning owing to his degeneration into sexuality. Berryman's incorrigible lust makes him culturally alienated. Another reason of the failure of love-therapy is that love is also temporary and when love dies, the pain of alienation returns in a form worse than ever. Berryman wrote poems bewailing this fact. "Where did it all go wrong?" asks Henry in The Dream Songs, which is "full of the death of love." We find the poet saying in "Sonnet 73" that love is
dangerous as a mirror. That love is like seeing oneself in a mirror or meeting one's soul indicates that love is no permanent solution to alienation. Love might even make one's alienation worse, for it gives one a momentary taste of the alternative, which will haunt one forever.

Although Berryman's desperate loneliness tends to excessiveness, it is the emotion shared to some extent by everyone. He suffered as an individual bearing great personal pain, but his suffering is representative of our own plight. To the poet alienation is neither a disease nor a blessing but, for better or worse, a central feature of human predicament, which finds an apt expression in his poetry.