CHAPTER - II

THE MAKING OF THE POET
To say that we must know something of a poet's life in order to understand his works is a cliché. But in John Berryman's case it is a fact. Since the term 'alienation' is basically concerned with the real life of the poet, it has become necessary to have some details about his sufferings, his turbulent childhood, his alienated adulthood, his unhappy marital life, his religious problems, the causes of his suicide, and so on. Alienated from his parents, his wives, his religion and society, Berryman could not restrain from giving expression to his sense of loneliness. His entire work is punctuated by his agony and an everlasting sense of estrangement.

Born in McAlester, Oklahoma, on 25 October 1914, John Berryman was named after his father, John Allyn Smith.¹ The poet's father was a banker and his

¹Some confusion exists about the poet's name. The surname "Berryman" is one that he assumed when he was legally adopted by John Angus McAlpin Berryman; the poet's full name then became John Allyn McAlpin Berryman.
mother a school teacher. Both were Roman Catholics in a heavily Protestant section of the country.

In mostways, Berryman's early childhood in McAlester seems to have been fairly normal. He suffered the usual childhood diseases (one of which left him partially deaf), studied heavily and enjoyed the company of fellow children. His upbringing was of the strict Roman Catholic type and, although he remained a Catholic in spirit but he attended Mass occasionally, his faith in religion was never without a doubt.

On 26 June 1926, when Berryman was only twelve, his father shot himself right outside his son's window. The father was buried in Oklahoma, but the son never returned to his grave. His father's suicide was one of the most traumatic events in the poet's life. His poetry refers often to his father's death and its effects on him, and his obsession with it foreshadows his own suicide.

After his father's death, the family moved to New York. Berryman's mother then married John Angus McAlpin Berryman, who formerly adopted the poet and his younger brother. His mother and step-father, however,
were divorced after ten years of marriage.

Berryman was sent to South Kent School in Connecticut. This school was very muscular, that is, devoted to athletics. Though he came to feel friendly towards the institution later, earlier. Berryman hated it with all his soul. Berryman himself tells us in "In & Out" (Love of Fame, 24) that he had been a miserable loner at South Kent and that by the end of his fifth form he had exhausted all the possibilities of the institution academically and went to Columbia without completing the session.

At Columbia, Berryman got a friendly atmosphere. The most important of his friends was Mark van Doren, the teacher who inspired him most. Mark van Doren recalls:

... as a student [Berryman] was high-strung, nervous, intense, devoted to his friends, morally indignant on frequent occasions beautifully relaxed on other occasions just as frequent, sensible at best, and always witty; though he took things hard, and sometimes to be composed of nothing but bristles and points.²

Berryman's statements about the importance of

van Doren to his development as a poet are unequivocal. Berryman could never imagine being a poet, until he reviewed van Doren's book *A Winter Diary* in 1935. Berryman was about nineteen when he wrote four sonnets for his mother, but it was the stimulus of van Doren that led him to become a poet. In the summer of 1935 Berryman's elegy, *Note on E.A. Robinson*, appeared in *The Nation*, which may be considered an auspicious beginning for a poet who was only twenty.

The poet's days at Columbia were not without difficulties. He encountered prejudice against Jews and Negroes, and he was repelled by it. At Columbia, his academic career was threatened because of his pursuit of a girl from Smith College, which caused him to lose interest in his studies. He had written a satisfactory final examination for the course but in a mood of masochism toward himself. At last, he received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from Columbia in 1936.

At Clare College his studies went more smoothly than at Columbia. During his two years abroad Berryman found time to grow a beard, to engage in a serious love affair, to meet W.B. Yeats, W.H. Auden and Dylan Thomas and to make trips to France and Germany—events which are of approximately equal importance in his later poems.
When Berryman returned to New York, he was ready to begin a career. He remained there during the academic year 1938-39, wrote many poems during this period and became a close friend of Delmore Schwartz, whose first book of poetry and prose had just been published. During this period he tried for many jobs including that of a teacher at Wayne University, the poetry editor of *The Nation*, and a lecturer at Harvard University, but none could satisfy him.

In 1940, Berryman's first collection of verse, "Twenty Poems", was included in *Five Young American Poets*. In 1942, *Poems* was published. In October 1942, on the eve of his twenty-eighth birthday, Berryman married Eileen Mulligan.

From 1940 onwards, Berryman received many grants and fellowships - Rockefeller Fellowship (twice), Holder Fellowship, and Kellet Fellowship - and served as a lecturer in Princeton University, where his writing increased in depth, breadth and recognition. His third collection of poetry, *The Dispossessed*, was published in 1948. Berryman's major work of scholarship, *Stephen Crane*, a critical biography, was published in 1950 and was received with mixed reviews, although there was considerably more praise than blame.
Berryman's enthusiasm for Stephen Crane was partly a result of several coincidental similarities between the two writers. Each was born of devout parents but took a strongly independent religious position. Each, as a child, was relatively slight in build. Each revered his father and felt abandoned at his father's death. Each had suicidal impulses, felt compelled to travel and to write, and had undergone a traumatic experience when he was a preadolescent.\(^3\)

Finally, Berryman found in Crane illustrations of a peculiar kind of irony and of a theory regarding the origin of poetry that he consciously adopted in \textit{The Dream Songs}.

During 1951 and 1969, Berryman served as a lecturer at the University of Cincinnati, State University of Iowa, Harvard, and as an instructor at the University of Minnesota, where he was regarded as something of an absent-minded professor, both in dress and manner, but as a popular and successful lecturer. He also taught as a Visiting Professor at several other Universities - at Berkeley in 1960, at Indiana in 1961, at

\(^3\) Berryman saw his father shot \textit{himself} right outside his window and Crane witnessed a white girl being stabbed by her negro lover.
and at Brown in 1962-63 - and made a two-month lecture tour of India for the State Department. During this period he was granted Guggenheim Fellowship twice and was elevated as the Regent's Professor by the university of Minnesota. His long poem *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* was published during this period.

Although Berryman's academic career progressed smoothly, after 1939, his personal life was always plagued with difficulties and sufferings. In 1947, he suffered a disastrous love affair that drove him to severe mental disorder. A colleague of the time recalled: "... no one drank, danced, talked, or even chased women with the abandon Berryman brought to these activities." ⁴

The poet underwent psychoanalysis from 1947 to 1953, therapy which helped him recover from the love affair. One of the love affairs of this time became the basis of his *Sonnets*. The affair brought him to the point of suicide, with thoughts of killing both himself and his mistress because she flatly refused to leave her husband and marry him. His first wife, who

was ignorant of the affair, persuaded him to undergo psychoanalysis. The analysis removed his suicidal depression and led him to renounce the affair. His heavy drinking and the tensions accompanying the writing of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* acted as the causes for his separation from his first wife in 1953.

In 1956 Berryman married his second wife, Anne Levine, to whom the slim volume *His Thought Made Pockets & Plane Buckt* (1958) was dedicated. A son, Paul, was born in 1957; but this marriage, too, ended in divorce in 1959. Again, heavy drinking and disorderly behaviour acted as contributory causes along with the tensions accompanying his writing, this time of *The Dream Songs*.

In 1961, Berryman married his third wife, Kathleen Donahue, a girl twenty-five years younger than him. Kathleen legally changed her name to 'Kate' in deference to Berryman's wishes. A daughter, Martha (named after Berryman's mother and called "Twissy" by her father) was born while the poet was teaching at Brown university in 1962-63. A second daughter, Sarah Rebecca, was born in June 1971.

Despite his successes - personal, academic
and aesthetic - the poet continually suffered from recurring nervous disorders, although his last two books of poetry - *Love & Fame* and *Delusions, Etc.* - were calmer in some ways than anything he had written in the two decades.

Berryman's poetic output divides into what might conveniently be called the early Berryman and the later Berryman. The early Berryman's work began appearing in the late 1930's in such journals as *Southern Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, and *New Republic*. He also published twenty poems in 1940 in the *New Directions Book*, *Five Young American Poets* and a pamphlet called *Poems* in 1942. Then in 1948 he published *The Dispossessed*. He also wrote a sonnet sequence in the 1940's, which contains 115 poems.

The later Berryman is known for *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1956), *77 Dream Songs* (1964), and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (1968), which completes the poem *The Dream Songs*. *His Thought Made Pocket & the Plane Buckt* (1958) is a group of thirteen poems which may be regarded as an extension of *The Dispossessed*. *Short Poems* (1967) brings together *The Dispossessed*, *His Toy Made Pockets*, and a rather

Berryman's *Love & Fame* and *The Dream Songs* are largely rooted in the poet's own experiences. But while the earlier work enters the terrain between the conscious and unconscious mind, explores dreams and fantasies, and dramatizes the fragmentation of the self, the newer poetry stays near the surface of experience, records reactions without probing their sources. There is also a corresponding shift from passages of inspired madness to what is often simply aphoristic. In his painfully prophetic poem "Of Suicide", for example, he wrote: "A basis rock-like of love & friendship/ for all this world-wide madness seems to be needed."\(^5\)

On 7 January 1972 the alienated Berryman leapt from a bridge in Minneapolis to a frozen river bank of the Mississippi and was killed instantly. He was 57 year old. The possible causes of his suicide are both legion and uncertain, the most important being his never overcoming the loss of his first father; his

having had serious drinking problems; his failing health; and his feeling that he was nothing but a "nuisance" to his family and friends. Whatever might have been the immediate motive, the loss to American letters was an unfortunate one. In 1972 Berryman's real opus posthumus, _Delusions, Etc._, was published.

Berryman took on the whole modern world and came to poetic terms with it. At the same time he took on himself and came to poetic terms with that, too. He saw the wreck of the modern world and was particularly aware of the wreck of his personal self in that world.

T.S. Eliot was amongst the foremost literary figures who shaped Berryman's poetic genius. Besides W.B. Yeats, Auden and van Doren, the later Berryman was influenced by Ezra Pound. By 1960 he had left Eliot and his own early impersonal poetry far behind. When Berryman was engaged in the composition of his _Homage to Mistress Bradstreet_, he was turning away from the impersonality of Eliot and the personal theory of Ezra Pound was much on his mind. Berryman's 'Dream Song' No. 224 is about Pound at Eliot's funeral. But it can also be read to mean, metaphorically, the disappearance of Eliot's influence on Berryman, the old, lonely Pound
standing there waiting "Ripe with pain, busy with loss". Pound's poetry constituted the perfect model of pain, loss and loneliness for *The Dream Songs*.

*The Dream Songs* is primarily a poem about loss. Conarroe writes that Henry, Berryman's alter ego, has suffered an "irreversible loss", we learn in the note to *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* and though we never find out exactly what this is, the evidence suggests that it is related to his father's suicide, the loss that "wiped out" his childhood and filled his adult life with dread and rage. Henry himself is suicidal, often so anxious and depressed that he can barely make it through the night.⁶

Henry's father's suicide provides the pattern for the other losses of the poem. Death can be considered the root cause of losses in Henry's life. Henry is preoccupied with suicide and is alienated from his friends, members of his family, and such great writers as W.B. Yeats, Thomas, Hemingway, Robert Frost, Faulkner, Williams, and Stevens because all of them are now dead. These deaths have only made Henry a fragmented personality. Not only does he mourn these deaths, but he also bewails his own disorderly life.

Like Ezra Pound, Berryman cannot make it cohere.

Other influences were also at work. Emily Dickenson's poetry, for instance, may well have helped Berryman to work out the baroque, eccentric, highly personal style the *The Dream Songs* and to conceive of his long poem as a series of short, intense lyrics, which followed a form uniquely his. Moreover, like Dickenson's poetry, *The Dream Songs* have the feeling of an extended foray into the poet's heart.

Berryman had in his early period written a series of negligible poems, "The Nervous Songs", which derived from Rilke. The notion of *The Dream Songs* may well have developed, to some extent, out of these "Nervous Songs". Gary Q. Arpin notes that Berryman's speaker, Henry who is "an imaginary Negro", is "a descendent of Rimbaud's 'nigger', a metaphysical slave, one of 'the race that sang under torture.'" 7 The

7 The relevant passage in Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* reads as follows:

... to me debauch and the comradship of women were denied. Not even a champion. I saw myself before an infuriated mob, facing the firing squad, weeping out of pity for the evil they could not understand, and forgiving! ... I have never belonged to this people; I have never been a Christian; I am of the race that sang under torture; laws I have never understood, I have no moral sense, I am a brute: you are making a mistake. "

Yes, my eyes are closed to your light. I am a beast, a nigger. But I can be saved. You are sham niggers, you, maniacs, fiends, misers. Merchant, you are a nigger; Judge, you are a nigger;
Black Man became for Berryman a symbol for the alien in
his own land, tortured, abused and misunderstood by the
powers that be. Berryman might have adopted not only
Rimbaud's characterization of a poet-as-black-man but
also his vision of life-as-force. For Henry as for
Rimbaud, life is a farce we all have to participate in,
that is painful as well as comically absurd.

The most important influence on Berryman,
however, is Walt Whitman, whose epic poem he examined
in detail in his 1957 essay, "Song of Myself:
Intention and Substance". He liked Whitman
unreservedly because he operates with great power and
beauty over a very wide range. Berryman saw Song of
Myself as the greatest poem so far written by an
American. To his mind, Song of Myself had displaced
The Waste Land. He carefully examined not only Song of
Myself but also the conception of poetry which had
brought it into being.

General, you are a nigger; Emperor, old itch. you are a nigger;
you have drunk of the untaxed liquor of Satan's still. — Fever
and cancer inspire this people. Cripples and old men are so
respectable that they are fit to be boiled. — The smartest thing
would be to leave this continent where madness stalks to provide
hostages for these wretches. I enter the true kingdom of the
children of Ham. See Bruce Bawer, The Middle Generation
The first motive for writing poetry which Whitman mentions in "A Backward Glance", is to be spiritual and heroic. Are The Dream Songs heroic? Berryman would have said, "Yes". As Conarroe writes:

Our lives are all potentially disastrous, and artists like Berryman and Lowell who live perilously close to the abyss make it possible for us to journey over threatening terrain, to experience its terror, and to return intact. Literature does not tell anything; it permits us to participate in a life, to share an angle of vision, and often to make some crucial personal discoveries. In courting certain kinds of disaster, Henry spares us the necessity of doing so for ourselves, overpowering as the attractions sometimes are.

We may agree with Arpin when he writes that Henry is a mixture of heroism and cowardice. 9

Whitman's second motive is religious. Berryman, of course, was capable of intense religious devotion. Though he spent most of his life circling around Roman Catholicism, he was interested in other faiths as well, and sometimes evinces a kind of pantheism which reminds one of Whitman's poetry. But

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can we say that The Dream Songs are religious? As Henry is at once a hero and a coward, so are his Songs simultaneously devout and blasphemous. Henry is constantly thinking of God and there is a great deal of Christian imagery in The Dream Songs but such imagery is generally used for negative purposes. Henry cannot find Christ, nor can he take Him to be a benevolent one. Despite Berryman's later return to Christianity, The Dream Songs is not about a man with a sense of religion but about a man who lacks such a sense and is tormented by this fact. Sometimes, as in Dream Song No. 26, Henry prays; but generally one gets the impression that if there is a God He is not a benevolent one and, according to Dream Song No. 13, God is Henry's enemy.

Whitman's third motive is to deal with the nature of time, which is, of course, the Middle Generation poets' major theme. Finally and apparently most importantly, Whitman's aim is to put a person on true records. For Whitman the poet is a voice, a personality, and Berryman could not find a suitable personality for this purpose than his own. His long poem, like Whitman's Song of Myself, is an attempt to put a 'person' on records; it is not the product of a
maker but of what Berryman calls a spiritual historian. Like Whitman, Berryman wanted to write a poem which was not merely about himself but also about his sufferings. In his essay on *Song of Myself*, Berryman pauses to admire these lines: "All this a swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine,/ I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there". Till the last moments of his life, Berryman's premier poetic principle was the one he had learnt from Whitman: "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there".

Berryman's life began in guilt. It was not his guilt but his mother's. Martha Smith gave birth by Caesarian operation to her son John Berryman. Martha had wanted her son desperately and from the moment of his birth the child was everything in the world to her. Having waited all her life for someone to lavish with affection, she loved her son obsessively.

Young Berryman looked on helplessly while his parents' marriage disintegrated. He overheard his parents' terrible disputes and suffered from divided loyalties. Smith (Berryman's father) fell into worst financial difficulties of his career. It was then that they began to quarrel. Berryman could not fall asleep
many nights because of the angry voices coming from his parents' room. And this might have been one of the reasons for Berryman's suffering from insomnia.

At about this time, both of Berryman's parents became romantically involved with other parties. Martha filed for divorce, and the day the divorce was to become final, Berryman's father committed suicide. The sound of gunshot that killed his father haunted Berryman's throughout his life. His feelings over the death were never resolved. He believed that he had gone through an agony of grief after his father's death. The incident had become the root cause of his psychological problems and had broken his peace of mind. His father's death helped make Berryman an unstable, insecure adult. The result, as we have already seen, was that he could not stick to any particular job throughout his life.

But Berryman's mother was an even more formidable influence. After Smith's suicide, she married the man who gave Berryman his name, but overprotective and domineering as she was, she centred her life around her son. Her love for her son was often less that of a parent than of a girlfriend. She reacted to the news of Berryman's first engagement with
resentment. She constantly manipulated his emotions, particularly his sense of guilt, and alternately gratified and oppressed him with her love. The power of Martha's love ruined Berryman's adult sexual relationships, and the poet got a damaging view of his father's manliness (and of his own) through his mother's descriptions of his father.

Berryman's adult feelings of resentment and guilt towards his mother were as strong as those he felt towards his dead father. Their arguments were frequent, explosive, and mutually wounding (Berryman, it seems, was recalling Hamlet's words: "Frailty, thy name is woman"), and often led to suicide threats on the part of Berryman. His threats to commit suicide were only to make his mother think that something had gone wrong with him.

Martha was no less jealous of Berryman's career than she was of his girlfriends and wives. It was not until his middle age that Berryman realised the effect that his adoring mother had on him. There is good reason to believe that he subconsciously doubted his mother's love. After all, it was she who had filed for the divorce from his father - the divorce which might indeed have been Smith's reason for killing
himself. One can imagine Berryman's subconscious thinking that if his mother could fall out of love with her husband and even drive him to suicide, couldn't she do the same to her son? This may account for many suicide threats on the part of Berryman during his adult life.

Berryman's early years contain the seeds of his more prominent adult characteristics. His insomnia, his sense of insecurity, his combativeness, his mania for success, instability in his career and his problems with women - all can be explained, at least in part, with reference to the childhood events and his relationship with his parents. The obsession with mortality in the poetry of Berryman can be traced, in part, to his father's suicide.

Not only Berryman but also his contemporaries, Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell and Robert Lowell, suffered from alienation. These Middle Generation poets might all have been born under the same star. None of them grew up in anything even remotely resembling a stable, solid home. Each was estranged from his father, and three of them had destructively close ties to possessive mothers. All developed an early sense of rootlessness and
alienation. A feeling of guilt and resentment towards the parents plagued each of them well into adulthood.

Estrangement, insecurity, resentment, guilt characterize the early years of all the four poets. Abnormal maternal influences encouraged narcissism in their sons, while at the same time damaging the young men's self-images. Repeatedly we find the mothers poisoning their sons' views of women and of the man-woman relationship, and confusing their general sense of sexual self-esteem and gender identification. Clearly the defeatist attitude towards love, the problems with heterosexual relationships, and the suggestions of homosexual tendencies that characterize the adult lives of the Middle Generation poets may all be traced, in part, to these aspects of the poets' relationships with their mothers. The poor emotional support undoubtedly contributed to the sense of rootlessness and alienation that all the four poets were to feel as adults. In the early alienation of the poets from their fathers may be found the key to many of their ideological and artistic attitudes. Each of them was impelled to a frantic life-long search for values, knowledge and truth.
Coming back to Berryman, it is not an easy task to understand such a devastating alienation, as suffered by him. As an adult, he found life nearly impossible to deal with. The notion that the poet is alone in a hostile world appears in his Dream Song No. 74, in which he says that "Henry hates the world" because the world has done him in.

Another fact that pained Berryman is that less and less people read serious poetry, which might result into his profound sense of alienation from his own culture. In the modern world, poetry is alienated. In the poetry of each of the Middle Generation poets may be found abundant evidence of their disaffection from contemporary America.

Berryman has had the hope that love would lead him out of alienation. Desperate for an escape from his pathological sense of isolation, he made unreasonable demands on love. But love was no more effective a salve than fame for Berryman's psychic wounds, for love dies and the pain of alienation returns even more corrosively.

Berryman's had three wives were unusually loyal, devoted, sensitive, understanding, compassionate, and levelheaded, while their husband, as
a rule, was unusually disloyal, suspicious, insensitive, and wildly erratic in behaviour. He was tormented by doubts over his first marriage and after the ceremony declared that God had not been there. Berryman has had an extensive series of sexual involvements both during and between marriages. What seems probable is that there was a great deal of repressed homosexuality.

In the life and writings of Berryman, there is a substantial evidence indicating an intemperate fear of, or even a hostility towards, and an obsession with homosexuality. He himself recorded as part of an Alcoholics Anonymous treatment in the late sixties that he "made homosexual advances drunk, 4 or 5 times". If his last novel, *Recovery*, is to be taken as autobiographical, Berryman's first suicide attempt took place on the heels of a homosexual encounter. "I'm a homosexual, damn you," says the Berryman - like narrator of *Recovery*. Berryman, in an Iowa jail during one of his maniac episodes, accused the policemen of being "homosexual criminals". The homosexual element in Berryman's psyche accounts for his powerful sense of

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11 John Berryman, "One Answer to a question", *Shenandoah* XVII (Autumn 1965), p. 68.
alienation and distrust of his wives. The distrust and suspicion on the part of the husband, according to classic psychoanalytic theory, usually represent the husband's defense against his own attraction towards his male friend. "The delusion", writes A.A. Brill, "represents an effort to defend oneself against strong homosexual tendencies, and in the male it is expressed in the formula 'I do not love him; she loves him.'" 12

As Berryman turned to lovers in the hope of escape from alienation, he also turned to friends. Friendship was very important for him; indeed, the history of his friendships was, in some cases, even more peculiar than that of his love affairs. Haffenden writes of him: "Despite the heavy demands he always made, his close friends remember him with unmitigated love." 13

In addition to everything else that contributed to Berryman's disillusionment and early death, it should be borne in mind that he watched Jarrell and Schwartz die so early and that might have


made his decision to end his life easier to reach.

Perhaps the ultimate symbol of Berryman's tragic sense of alienation is his insomnia. Schwartz once remarked to Berryman that they would be known to future students of their work as "the sleepless school of poets". Sleepless Berryman was in his most characteristic position: helpless, suffering, alone, trying to combat and survive the dark night of the soul. To him, life was indeed a lonely, painful night from which he desperately sought an escape, and the supposed joys of fame, love, and friendship proved unable wholly to vanquish the profound pain of various kinds of alienation.