HUMANISM IN THE POETRY OF EARLE BIRNEY

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Abstract

The main thematic concern of Earle Birney's poetry is man and the condition of man; in this sense he is a humanist. Most of the poems attempt to place before the reader a picture of real men, who are seen in all their glory and all their degradation. The forces of evil and the men who unleash them are contrasted with the capacity for good that mankind possesses.

The first volume of poetry discussed is David and Other Poems (1942). In the title poem one individual alienates himself from nature for the sake of his friends; by exercising his will he sacrifices himself for a higher, human, good. The other poems are works of natural description, poetry of war, and poetry of the confrontation of urban life and nature. In this volume also, we see Birney's interest in the language of poetry as he experiments with verse forms and creates neologisms on an Anglo-saxon pattern. Now is Time (1945) is composed largely of war poems; the precarious human condition is dramatized even more vividly in poetry that examines selflessness and love, a lack of which alienates men from one another. The Strait of Anian (1948) and Trial of a City (1952) emphasize like "David" the importance of man's will in determining what the future will be; the power for good is in man's will to good. Trial of a City is a verse drama that epitomizes Birney's humanistic concerns and greatly extends his use of neologism, Middle-English and Anglo-Saxon forms. His purpose in creating new words is compared and contrasted with that of

James Joyce and William Barnes. In Ice Cod Bell or Stone (1962) and Near False Creek Mouth (1964), the humanistic impetus of the poems is continued in a concern for culture and history-the past that man himself has created. As a visitor to foreign lands, the poet appreciates the culture of the local people and sees the conflict between material prosperity and the heritage of the past. Overcoming the estrangement resulting from his wealth, he comes to love the people and in so doing he is restored to the community of men. In these last two volumes, the poet's technique includes typographical experimentation after the fashion of E.E. Cummings and a manipulation of words and letters that is almost like concrete poetry.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The following thesis is a study of the poetry of Earle Birney. Particular stress has been placed upon man and the condition of man as treated in individual poems, though it is by no means implied that there are not other poems which diverge from the subject treated here. An examination of a considerable number of Birney's poems reveals evidence which supports the main contention of this thesis-that the dominant concern of his poetry as a whole is man. "Humanistic" is perhaps the most accurate word to describe the thematic burden of the poems, although the academic implications of the term are somewhat misleading. "Humanistic", as the word is used in the context of this thesis, is meant in its broadest sense as that which relates to man and bears no relationship to Renaissance humanism with its emphasis upon the revival of interest in classical languages and literature.

In varying degrees, the poetry here treated reflects the precariousness of man's life in the world. Always there are choices to be made and the results of man's decisions are war and peace, security and disturbance, love and hatred. For this reason, therefore, it is unwise to take any one poem as an absolute statement on life. The poems are best viewed in the context of Birney's work as a whole; with this perspective one is able to avoid the convenient but not very just approach of designating the poet as a prophet of doom or a naive optimist. The reality of any given moment or situation, be it joyful or sad, demands an honest aesthetic response, and it is such a response that Birney gives.

What this latter point means for the poetry itself is that

there is no systematized philosophical framework against which Birney checks and examines his individual poetic insights. This is not to say that his is a completely non-didactic poetry; there is didacticism, but it is not imposed from without. The men and women in his poems and the events that shape their lives can be altered by love, the source of which is within. Man can will to stop war, to end poverty, to halt racial prejudice, but the choice rests with man alone. It is in the possibility of peace, economic justice, and respect for other men that hope resides and it is in their continued absence that we have cause for fear.

To a large extent, then, the poetry of Earle Birney is one of social comment, insofar as the poems involve men and the world that men have created. But it is not a proletarian verse, for the plight of the workers and their cause are only part of the total picture of man.

Chapter One of the thesis deals with the earliest volume, David and Other Poems, published in 1942. In "David" itself we see the importance of one man's decision in a choice that alters his outlook on nature and by which he grows to maturity. The rest of the poems have been classified as natural descriptions, in which nature is described in terms borrowed from the world of man-especially warring and hostile man; poetry depicting the evils of urban life, in which man is seen as an intruder upon nature and some of the creations of man as being opposed to him and alienating him from nature; and poetry of war, which deals with the stark realities of conflict and the

effect of war upon nature. In this first volume we are also exposed to Birney's interest in Anglo-Saxon verse and his use of neologism.

The second chapter consists of a more extensive survey of the war poems. Those selected for discussion are drawn from the volume entitled Now Is Time (1945). Birney has arranged the poems under three headings: "Tomorrow", "Yesterday", and "Today". The first of these sections is pervaded by a sense of urgency and impending doom; war, poverty, and greed are caused by the presence of selfishness or the absence of love. Men are thereby separated from one another and love becomes imperative if the evils of war are to be avoided. "Yesterday" has the motif of remembrance of friends and loved ones in the past, while in the "Today" section peace has come, but it is precarious; the stress is once again upon love as a positive force and not merely upon the absence of hostilities.

The Strait of Anian and the drama Trial of a City, published in 1948 and 1952 respectively, are discussed in Chapter Three. As in the previous chapter, the perilousness of man's existence remains an important part of Birney's vision of man. The emphasis here is upon the ability of man to alter events by his own volition. Despite the dangers of existence, men must continue to live as best they can; the power for good is in man's will to good. Trial of a City is a verse drama, a new genre that epitomizes Birney's humanistic concerns. In it he carries his experimentation with language further than in his earlier volumes. The Anglo-Saxon and Middle-English types of verse are continued, but there is a much greater use of neologism, in

connection with which James Joyce and William Barnes are considered. In the creation of new words Birney finds a fresh source of humour and sustains his search for a more unconventional idiom, though he differs from Joyce in not sustaining the use of neologism throughout the whole of his work and from Barnes in that he is not a linguistic purist.

The volumes of poetry treated in Chapter Four are Ice Cod Bell or Stone (1962) and Near False Creek Mouth (1964). Many of the poems in these volumes have their setting in foreign lands and the subject matter is intimately connected with the history and culture of the local people. There is less concern here with primeval nature. There are fewer poems of description, and greater emphasis is placed upon the past that man himself has created. The people of these foreign countries possess a heritage that the poet by virtue of his birth is denied. Modern civilization threatens to eliminate the culture of these people and consequently some poems portray and lament the conflict between the old tradition and the new material prosperity. As one who is prosperous, the poet is estranged from the inhabitants of the lands that he visits, but comes to understand and appreciate them; sharing a common humanity, he conquers his repugnance at the squalor of their life and achieves brotherhood and love.

Chapter 11

David and Other Poems

I

In the author's note to Near False Creek Mouth, Earle Birney writes:

> This book contains the longest non-dramatic poem I have ever written. Its setting is Vancouver but its theme is our precarious universe. Most of the poems involve people and places thousands of miles from False Creek, near whose mouth I live, but they are all close to us now, not only in time space, but in the sharing of needs and hopes and premonitions of disaster.[1]

What this statement does is to bring into focus the ambiguous, or, as the poet phrases it, the "precarious" universe in which we live. Birney's poetry is at once optimistic and pessimistic: optimistic, in that it captures the hopes spoken of above and pessimistic in that it realistically depicts the dangers which inhabit and threaten to engulf our world.

Birney's first volume of poetry, David and Other Poems (1942), manifests the precariousness of human existence in terms which were of great import for a people surrounded by war. The immediacy of the war poems in this and the succeeding volume derives in part from their frank portrayal of the horrors of war and its aftermath, but more specifically from their appraisal of the lack of humane values and capacity for evil on the part of some men who could so degrade their fellow humans and leave so little to be cherished in the way of human dignity. Hope and fear, for Birney, have their source in man's communion with nature and other men; and it is

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[1] Earle Birney, Near False Creek Mouth (Toronto, 1964), author's note.

from these two relationships that the human values of love, honour, friendship, and trust receive their definition.

Among the early poems it is "David" which best illustrates the ambiguous nature of human existence. In a sense the war continues here as well, for superficially it is a narrative of men against nature:

> We climbed, to get from the ruck of the camp, the surly
>
> Poker, the wrangling, the snoring under the fetid
> Tents, and because we had joy in our lengthening
> coltish
> Muscles, and mountains for David were made to see
> over,
> Stairs from the valleys and steps to the sun's retreats.[2]

The two young men of the poem delight in the conquering of their mountains. Bob, the narrator, is a novice in the art of mountain-climbing; in serving his apprenticeship to David, he comes to possess something of the vision that the outdoor life engenders in his mentor.

The first and most obvious aspect of this vision is an appreciation of the beauty which surrounds them:

> The dawn was a floating
> Of mists till we reached to the slopes above timber, and
> won
>
> To snow like fire in the sunlight.
> (11, p.2, 11.7-9)

> We rose and trod past the feathery
> Larch, while the stars went out, and the quiet heather
> Flushed, and the skyline pulsed with the surging bloom
>
> Of incredible dawn in the Rockies.
> (V11, pp.5-6, 11.6-9)

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[2]Earle Birney, "David", David and Other Poems (Toronto, 1942), I, p.1, 11.4-8. Hereafter cited by section, page, and line number in the body of the text.

A second, but no less important, aspect of David's vision is the way in which pleasure may be derived from the danger amidst the surrounding beauty; even moments of peril can be turned to advantage:

> And David
> taught me
>
> How time on a knife-edge can pass with the guessing of fragments
> Remembered from poets, the naming of strata beside one,
> And matching of stories from schooldays....
> (111, p.3, 11.4-7)

The dangers, however, if they are to be an organic part of the poem, must not exist solely as the occasion for diversion and good comradeship. They must also be an integral part of the narrative structure.[3] Throughout the poem there are incidents recounted which serve to foreshadow David's death:

> That day we chanced on the skull and the splayed white ribs
> Of a mountain goat underneath a cliff, caught tight
> On a rock. Around were the silken feathers of kites.
> And that was the first I knew that a goat could slip.
> (111, p.3, 11.13-16)

In section five there is an even more direct anticipation of David's fall and Bob's innocence-destroying decision:

> That day returning we found a robin gyrating
> In grass, wing-broken. I caught it to tame but David
> Took and killed it, and said, "Could you teach it to fly?"
> (V, p.4, 11.10-12)

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[3] In an article entitled "Earle Birney et Robert Finch", Gants Du Ciel, 11 (Spring, 1946), 83-96, Roy Daniells also sees them as part of the movement of the poem, thereby contributing to the rapidity and continuity of the poem as a whole.

The implication of this incident for what is to come is that mere existence in itself is never sufficient motivation for continued living. Consonant with David's treatment of the bird is his later request, at the climax of the poem, that Bob push him over the precipice to the ice below. This request follows David's fifty foot drop to a ledge after he has saved Bob from a fall; still conscious, David does not want to go on living if he must do so in a wheelchair. When, reluctantly, Bob accedes to David's wishes, he runs from the site of the accident; now nature assumes a different guise:

> I will not remember how nor why I could twist
> Up the wind-devilled peak, and down through the
> chimney's empty
> Horror, and over the traverse alone. I remember
> Only the pounding fear I would stumble on It
> ---
> the fear, and the need to make sure It
> was there
> On the ice, the running and falling and running, leaping
>
> Of gaping green-throated crevasses, alone and pursued
> By the Finger's lengthening shadow.
> (1X, pp.9-10, 11.1-4;7-10)

The concluding lines of the poem are significant in that they indicate the irrevocability of what has just taken place:

> And none but the sun and incurious clouds have lingered
> Around the marks of that day on the ledge of the Finger,
> That day, the last of my youth, on the last of our
> mountains.
> (1X, p.11, 11.30-32)

Through his friendship with David, Bob comes to appreciate the escape that the mountains represented from the drudgery of everyday life. Within their joy in the outdoor life and indeed an integral part

of it, is an inherent danger. This danger and its challenge are necessary to the vision of life that David possesses, and in which, to a degree, Bob shares. In establishing, or re-establishing, his contact with nature, Bob lives life more fully, shares in the joys of comradeship, and is seized with the élan that pervades everything David does. Alienated from nature by the tediousness of his work, Bob is temporarily restored. Because of his friendship for David, he sacrifices the joy of his restoration; he can no longer be as he was. "David" is, as one critic phrased it, "a story of youth stabbed into age by a sudden and unintelligible agony".[4]

At this point it may be objected that Bob's condition as a man has deteriorated for now he has neither his friendship with David nor his affiliation with nature. To a degree, this is true, but an examination, in the light of Birney's humanism, of what has occurred reveals that the sacrifice in terms of mental attrition is justified in that a higher good, human friendship, is served. It is because Bob has come to understand David and his vision of life that he is able to suppress his own feeling of revulsion and push David over the cliff. It might be added, moreover, that Bob's alienation from nature at the end of the poem differs from his estrangement at the poem's beginning. At the outset of the narrative, the source of Bob's separation is external; it consists chiefly of the type of work in which he has been

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[4] "David". Anon.rev., Canadian Author and Bookman, XlX (June, 1943), 16.

engaged and the milieu surrounding it. At the conclusion of the poem, the alienation, if it can be termed such, is self-willed; the source is internal.

Viewed, therefore, in the light of Birney's poetry as a whole, "David" is an early example of that approach to life which places supreme emphasis on the worth and dignity of man in himself. The difference between the Bob of the initial stanzas and the man of the poem's conclusion consists of the individual's exercising, freely and deliberately, his right of choice. The oppressive forces which drove both Bob and David to freedom in the mountains can be escaped and positively counteracted, as the poem illustrates. Temporarily at least, their roots in nature are restored. Rather than return to a life of pallid existence, David chooses to die; rather than forsake the friendship of David, Bob acquiesces to his wishes. The resultant horror that Bob experiences is directly linked with his having sacrificed his communion with nature, desirable and necessary as it is, for a higher human good.

II

The remainder of the poems in the first volume can be variously classified as natural descriptions, poetry of war, and poetry depicting the evils of urban life. In each of these three categories, as in "David" itself, there emerges the ever-present perilousness of existence. To illustrate this point, let us take, for the purpose of analysis, several poems of each group, beginning with those that describe nature.

"Reverse on the Coast Range" depicts the destruction of

trees on the slope of a mountain by a spring avalanche. The growth which exists farther down the mountain-side nearer the sea is spared. The poem begins:

> Confidently in the higher valleys
> The hemlocks massed their heavy reserves,
> Shanking themselves with furze over the years,
> Like mammoths hairy against the snow.[5]

Other species of trees are described with the same military and war-like imagery; when the avalanche takes place, it too is pictured in the same way:

> With a crack and the roar of a thousand howitzers,
> Out from the mountain's writhing camouflage
> Roared the full broadside of the enemy,
> The flooding and fanning avalanche,
> Bombing from the ledges the juniper outposts
> Shredding them down through the bursting snow,
> Down with the uptorn larch and the levelled firs,
> To drown them deep with the hemlocks
> In implacable rocks and ice
> In the valley's vast obliteration.
> (11. 16-25)

At the conclusion of the poem, the glory and pride of these trees is seen in all of its transitoriness:

> Far away the dogwood heard and, clutching
> The dreams of their waxen vanities,
> Fled down the seaslopes
> To where a madrona tanned its lazy limbs
> In the sun, and oblivious maples
> Plaited within their quiet boles
> A million golden tassels for the spring.
> (p.18, 11.26-32)

The effectiveness of the poem lies in the contrast between the last seven lines and what has gone before. The maples and the madrona are described as "oblivious" and "lazy" respectively, while the firs

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[5] Earle Birney, "Reverse on the Coast Range", David and Other Poems, p. 17, 11. 1-4.

are "cool and spiked as flint arrowheads" (1.7) and the pines, "straight and cold as gunbarrels" (1.10). The power of the pines and firs is suggested by the use of the harsh consonantal sounds, "k", "t", and "g", in the latter two phrases and the abundant martial imagery in the poem as a whole. When the avalanche descends, it is with a "crack" and "roar"; when it strikes it is like a "broadside" salvo, "bombing", "shredding", and drowning all in its path. In contrast, the maples plait "within their quiet boles" and the madrona tans "its lazy limbs".

While the weight of the poem in terms of line distribution is heavily descriptive of the military aspect of nature, the key to the poem's interpretation would appear to be in the smaller section. The image of the dogwood, their illusions shattered, fleeing to the environment of the madrona and maple, by contrast re-enforces the power so vigorously depicted earlier, and yet reveals the fragility of this power when pitted against a greater force such as that of the avalanche.

Two other poems, "October in Utah", and "Kootenay Still-life", also portray nature in terms of its inherent danger, although neither ought to be interpreted as the poet's final statement on nature. The former describes the death of summer with an imagery that depicts the

> shrewish she-wind...
> Convulsing the ochre aspens and leaving them glummer
> For half their leaves put to light[sic] by her gusty mouth.
>
> Up from the roadway she conjures with cronish broom
> The squalling dust to engulf the unwary old man in the park....

> Down smites the rain on the roofs, and the autumn
> dims on
> The mountain....Slain is our summer, pulseless and
> chill.[6]

As in "Reverse on the Coast Range", a natural event is depicted in violent terms. The agent of violence here, however, is not an avalanche, but the south wind personified as a witch. Instead of the vanity of the soldier-like trees, it is summer which is destroyed. Within both these poems the potential dangers of nature are actualized and vividly described. In "Kootenay Still-life", however, the scene is, as the title would suggest, an externally serene one. But the element of danger is no less present, for it is latent within the description; here, too, nature is subject to its own vagaries. The poem reads:

> Columning up from crisscross rot
> (Palmed flat by a wind forgotten)
> Breathes a single bullpine, naked
> For fifty cinnabar feet, then shakes
> At the valley a glittering fist of needles
> Rivergreen. And stops, headless.
>
> On the yellow fang of the bullpine's broken
> Neckbone sits, eyeing her mouse below,
> A crow.[7]

It is interesting to note that in the three poems of this first group, nature and particular occurrences within nature are never described in merely bucolic fashion. There is an emphasis upon the precarious element in the world of nature, be it potential

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[6]Birney, "October in Utah", David, p.19, ll.2-6; 15-16.

[7]Birney, "Kootenay Still-life", David, p.22.

or actual. All three poems, moreover, attribute human qualities to nature. In "Reverse on the Coast Range" the trees are personified as soliders; in "October in Utah" the wind is viewed as a crone; "Kootenay Still-life" sustains an image of the pine as breathing, "naked", shaking a fist, and "headless". In these poems nature is used as the matrix for Birney's theme of the perilousness of existence. The poems of war and the poems of urbanization parallel and echo the conflict and danger of the more descriptive natural verse. In order to emphasize the horrors of war and the ills of urbanization, however, the more serene aspect of nature, peaceful and untainted, is stressed.

At this juncture, before treating these two themes, it may be well to emphasize that the classifications along thematic lines are not intended to be mutually exclusive. The more obvious poems fall rather easily into one or another of these groups; others, not so sharply delineated by their subject matter, may be placed somewhat arbitrarily under one or more of the headings. For the writer of this thesis, the selection and classification has been dictated by what seemed to him to be the emphasis of any one poem. Thus, a particular work may speak of both war and the evils of sophisticated life in the city; usually, within the context of the poem, one of these two themes seems more important than the other. To facilitate analysis and to avoid needless repetition, therefore, the aforementioned system of classification has been made use of.

Viewed as individual poems or as part of a general mosaic, those poems of Birney which deal with either war or urbanization are

never part of an abstract philosophical system. Always the immediate concern is with real people and real events and the delicate balance that is maintained between life and death, war and peace, serenity and disturbance.

One of the finest of the war poems is "Dusk on English Bay", in which a view of the Gulf of Georgia becomes the occasion for a vision of a world in conflict. After describing the lights of the city, the smell of city life, bathers in the twilight, the stars and the moon, the poet writes:

> Night's dissolvent eats into the west,
> Browning the stippled mauve, the copper sulphate,
> Paling and paling the opal, melting the latest
> Speck of robin's eggshell into the Gulf of Georgia,
> And ever over the Pacific pursuing tomorrow's
> Sun.[8]

At this point, the placid descriptive tone of the poem alters:

> But tomorrow's sun is clean excaped
> And rushes down through Asian skies, garish
> With burst of shell and unarrested rocket,
> And burns on Libyan sands, by bombs
> Cratered and red with libations poured to the guns.
> (11. 20-24.)

> Speeding and soaring he comes, the Atlantic sighting,
> And there is no Joshua can brake his flight, nor
> Any clutch of ours can hold this precious night.
> (p.31, 11.32-34.)

In the poem as a whole and in the latter half of the poem in particular, the controlling image is that of the sun and the sights it must see on its daily journey. The peace and serenity of an evening on the west coast of Canada is interrupted by the intrusion of war

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[8]Birney, "Dusk on English Bay", David, p.30, 11.15-20.

and death, because the sun serves as the vehicle for a vision that transcends the immediate locale. Thus, the progression from the first part of the poem to the second is smooth and unobtrusive; a number of verbal parallels relate what the poet sees immediately before him to the vision of the sun which he attains:

> Through the popcorn
> Reek, hotdogs and chips, the air lets fall
> A rain of quiet coolness on the flesh.
> (11.2-4,)

> and the rain of iron
> Cooling the flesh, and the stench of the flesh cooled,
> (p.31, 11.29-30.)

> The calling
> Bathers trot the footpocked sand on legs
> Unsexed by distance, waving arms severed
> With twilight.
> (11.4-7.)

> tomorrow's sun
> Is flying... widening his light
> On limbs unsexed and severed,
> (pp.30-31, 11.25-29, passim.)

> From the whitening ribs of the raft
> divers
> Flash cream arcs across the expiring
> Sunset, and are quenched.
> (11. 7-9.)

> Past Narvik's blanching hulks tomorrow's sun
> Is flying, over the Mediterranean's smudged
> Embattled sharks, and the sailors quenched,
> (11. 25-27.)

If, as the concluding lines of the poem suggest, the flight of the sun could be arrested, then the scene before the poet might be cherished in itself. But here too, as in "David", the beauties of nature are ambiguous; they can no longer merely be seen and appreciated. Through them the imagination of the poet effects an

awareness of the less than tranquil milieu of the world at the time. To this end the internal movement or sense of the poem is swift, with one scene blending almost imperceptibly into the next. Structurally, the abundance of rove-over lines impels the verse forward, in keeping with the motion that the poet attributes to the sun.

Other war poems variously portray the rebellion of a nation oppressed ("France 1941"), the desire of man to seek what is good and just ("On Going to the Wars"), the feeling of desolation of an invaded people ("European Nocturne"), and the effect of war upon nature itself ("War Winter"). This latter poem is particularly interesting because it illustrates the poet's conscious interest in Anglo-Saxon verse:

> In some poems - notably "Anglo-Saxon Street"- he deliberately imitates Anglo-Saxon poetic techniques, using the alliterative line, the mid-line hiatus, and archaic words....More often the Anglo-Saxon influences are less obvious but equally real, and take the form of direct energy of expression, the sparing use of adjectives, and a sinewy litheness of verse movement.[9]

Though we will not treat "Anglo-Saxon Street" until later in this section, much of what has been cited above is applicable to the poem presently under consideration. The text of "War Winter" reads:

> SUN,
> proud Bessemer, peltwarmer, beauty,
> these weeks steer us to scan sky for you.
> The dun droppings blur, we drown in snow.
> Is this tarnished chimneyplug in a tenantless room,
> this sucked wafer, white simpleton,
> You?

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[9]Desmond Pacey, Creative Writing in Canada (Toronto, 1952), p.139.

> Not chiefly the month moulds you, heartcharmer,
> to scant hammerdent on hardiron sky,
> not alone the latitude to lodgers on this
> your slantwhirling lackey, lifecrusted satellite,
> this your one wrynecked, woedealing world.[10]

The mid-line hiatus is evident from the typography of the printed verses themselves. The effect of the break upon the line structure, when the poem is read aloud, is to give greater stress to each half-line. The emphasis thus produced is re-enforced by the alliterative "p's" and "b's" of the second line, the "s" and "sk's" of the third, and so on. The habit of word combination, to a large extend neologism, adds a terseness and strangeness in keeping with the abrupt nature of the caesural pause; witness the presence of "peltwarmer", "chimneyplug", and "heartcharmer".

The unification of the two sections of the poem is achieved partially through the question and answer structure of the poem itself, although the answer must be inferred from what is said. In addition, the opening lines of the second stanza sustain the image of the sun as "Bessemer"; the use of "moulds", "hammerdent", and "hardiron" continues the metaphor relating to the Bessemer process with which the poem is introduced.

In a manner that is at once traditional and novel, the poem suggests a picture of a world that is fraught with anxiety and trouble. Nature itself, represented by the sun, is degraded. Presumably, however, nature is debased only insofar as there are men to wage wars and men to see the havoc that war brings to nature.

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[10] Birney, "War Winter", David, p.33, ll.1-12.

In the war poems and the poems of description the defined polarities appear to be man and nature. It has been observed that in the former, war and the effects of war taint even the most tranquil and remote of natural scenes, while in the latter, natural occurrences are depicted in hostile human terms. The third group of poems deals more explicitly with the confrontation of civilized urban man and untouched primeval nature. While not always stating anything startlingly original, the poetry treated below speaks to modern man in twentieth-century terms and almost always has as its frame of reference the all-perasive ambiguity of existence.

Within this third and largest group of poems, some present the squalor of life in the city and others are given over to the simple pleasures of nature; yet other poems present a confrontation of these two within their own bounds. One of the finest of this latter type is the sonnet "Grey Rocks":

> Webbed hands of balsam soothed the shore that night,
> Consoling with a labouring tide, which stirred
> With its dark timeless pain, and swelling, blurred
> Grey rock and air into the sea, and might
> Have pulled the hills into its level flight
> Had not the mummy moon leaned down to splash
> Her immemorial gay quicksilver sash
> Across the withered travail of the bight.[11]

This octave not only describes a particular scene, but also evokes a mood of restlessness. There is beauty depicted, but it is a beauty in which the shore is "soothed" and consoled by a "labouring tide". The physical point of view which we as readers imagine is one from

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[11] Birney, "Grey Rocks", David, p.20, ll.1-8.

which the sea, shore, and rocks seem to blend into one. It is only by the light of the moon, with her "quicksilver sash", that the distinguishing features of the landscape assume their natural forms. The dominant impression of the scene is one of continuity; the tide itself and the locale lend themselves to such an impression. Moreover, from the point of view of technique, we might observe that paralleling the fluidity of the scene itself is the presence of several enjambed lines (ll.2,3,4,6).

In contrast to the quiet mood of the octave, the initial four and one-half lines of the sestet contain the noises of man's intrusion:

> Into the saga bobs the nervous, lean
> Lament of ukuleles, and the choke
> And belching of a motor. Voices wail
> Laconic time. Has an-y bod-y SEEN
> My...gal...?
> (ll.9-13)

The diction here is deliberately chopped and terse: "bobs", "lean", "nervous", "choke", all convey the impression of alien man's presence. Adding to the effect of the diction is the ruptured movement of the song the intruders are singing; to convey this, the typography is hesitant and uneven. While the lines here are enjambed, the movement of the verse is retarded by the cryptic monosyllabic language and the broken structure of the song. The resultant tension of the sestet is resolved in the concluding lines:

> The cut sash heals. The shores
> invoke
> Once more the old tide's mumbled gnawing tale.
> (ll. 13-14)

The summary nature of these lines is an aspect of Birney's technique

for which he has been criticized.[12] They do serve, however, to restore the original mood of the poem without being overtly didactic. Following so closely upon the picture of man, they emphasize the transitory nature of the intrusion in contrast with the "timeless pain" of the old tide and the "immemorial" sash of the moon.[13]

Occasionally in Birney's poetry there appears a specific identification of the evils of urbanization with one region of the country, as when he associates Ontario with much that is sterile in modern society. In an assertion of loyalty to his western homeland the poet longs to escape to the simple life and "Eagle Island":

> I've had enough of this inert
> Ontario, this eunuch sea
> And pastured fenced nonentity.
> I'm off to where a seafresh sun
> Slants golden warmth at dawn across
> Dwarfed Jurassic woods of moss
> And olive lichens plaited firm
> Upon a knobbly island's pelt,[14]

This rather long Canadian version of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" ends with the couplet:

> I'll steal to Eagle Island first
> And slake my salt Columbian thirst.
> (p.25, 11.89-90)

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[12] W.E. Fredeman, "Earle Birney" Poet", British Columbia Library Quarterly, XXIII (January, 1960), 12.

[13] Another poem that, like "Grey Rocks", presents man in the role of the intruder is "Monody on a Century". The concluding lines read:

> Now bud is rot and fragrance rust
> Around the martialled bees,
> And men with boots will put an end
> To making similes. (p.27, 11.9-12)

[14] Birney, "Eagle Island", David, p.23, 11. 1-8

The poet, however, is not unaware that contemporary man has also afflicted his own area of the country; in "West Vancouver Ferry" he writes:

> The ferry slides, then veers to buck
> The gleaming midstream tidal rip,
> Leaving the bobbing cans and ruck
> Of sawdust, butts, and fly-kissed slaughter[15]

Within some of Birney's poems, sometimes explicitly expressed, is the desire not merely to escape the noise and ruck of modern living but to return to something primeval and untainted. The ills of contemporary civilization, brought about by man himself, threaten to make him insensible of the roots in nature which he once had and which were a part of his life. In one poem, "Hands", the narrator expresses his alienation from nature in this manner:

> Too bewildering
> Even in the dead days of peace was this manumission,
> The leaves' illogical loveliness. Now am I frustrate,
> Alien. Here is the battle steeped in silence,
> The fallen have use and fragrantly nourish the quick.
> My species would wither, away from the radio's
> barkings,
> The headline beating its chimpanzee breast, the nimble
> Young digits at levers and triggers.[16]

What follows throughout the remainder of the poem is a contrasting of the hands of nature-the leaves of the trees-and the hands of man. The concluding lines read:

> We are not of these woods, we are not of these woods,
> Our roots are in autumn, and store for no spring.
> (p.29, 11.38-39)

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[15]Birney, "West Vancouver Ferry", David, p.16, 11.19-22

[16]Birney, "Hands", David, p.28, 11.5-12.

Here, explicitly stated, is the estrangement of man from the world of nature. While much of the imagery of the poem relates to the war in Europe, the war can be viewed as part of the barren environment that man has created.

Two poems, "Anglo-Saxon Street" and "Slug in Woods", provide, when taken together, a contrast between the world of man and the world of nature. The former, as was mentioned earlier, is written in the Anglo-Saxon verse structure; it depicts the squalor of existence in a war-torn English city. The latter is a detailed description of one of the slowest of nature's creatures. "Slug in Woods" makes no attempt even at implicit didacticism. Given the polarities that they represent--the world of man and the world of nature--let us proceed to a closer analysis of the poems themselves.

Both "Slug in Woods" and "Anglo-Saxon Street" present a temporal progression to the reader. The movement of the slug is laborious, yet patient:

> Hours on, he will resume
> his silver scrawl, illume
> his palimpsest, emboss
> his diver's line across
> that waving green illim-
> itable seafloor.[17]

Antithetical to this slowness is the following description of working men released from their labours:

> What! after whistleblow, spewed from wheelboat,
> after daylong doughtiness, dire handplay
> in sewertrench or sandpit, come Saxonthegns,
> Junebrown Jutekings, jawslack for meat.[18]

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[17]Birney, "Slug in Woods", David, p.13, 11.13-18.

[18]Birney, "Anglo-Saxon Street", David, p.15, 11.33-36.

The conclusions of both poems are consonant with the description employed throughout each: here again the contrast is noteworthy. The final line of "Slug in Woods" reads:

> So spends a summer's jasper century.
> (1.30)

And "Anglo-Saxon Street" ends:

> Slumbers now slumtrack, unstinks, cooling,
> waiting brief for milkhind, mornstar and worldrise.
> (11.48-49)

The contrast between the two poems is not limited only to the sense or content of either. The description of the slug is sustained and re-enforced by an imagery as closely worked and detailed as the minute subject matter demands:

> For eyes he waves greentipped
> taut horns of slime. They dipped
> hours back, across a reef,
> a salmonberry leaf.
> (11.1-4)

The metaphor of the reef introduces the marine element, which provides the vehicles for further imagery relating to the ocean. We have cited lines in which the slug is compared to a diver on the seafloor. Unobstrusively, the nautical images continue:

> Slim
> young jay his sudden shark;
> the wrecks he skirts are dark
> and fungussed firlogs, whom
> spirea sprays enplume,
> encoral.
> (11.18-23)

> while mounting boles foretell
> of isles in dappled air
> fathoms above his care.
> Azygous his viscid wife,
> foodward he noses cold beneath his sea.
> (11.24-29)

From such a detailed description we may presume that the poet considers even the humblest of nature's creatures worthy of his imaginative and poetic powers; the fact that the poem exists attests to this inference. There is no declaration of the beauty of what the poet sees, no didacticism of any kind; the poem, rather, is extremely simple, for the movement of the slug is consistently portrayed in the dominant marine imagery.

Similarly, the diction and imagery of "Anglo-Saxon Street" support the theme of the squalor of life in an environment that man has created. The poet uses the older verse form while combining modern words and phrases in a manner that graphically depicts the street as he views or imagines it. The following passages show the unifying time sequence of the poem and, at the same time, provides further examples of alliteration, neologism, and mid-line hiatus-the better known features of Anglo-Saxon verse:

> DAWNDRIZZLE ended, dampness steams from
> blotching brick and blank plasterwaste
> (p.14, 11.1-2)
>
> Stained pane, inset on slattern street,
> announces blue noon for gnatclouds and sparrows,
> while dustsodden drops still drip from talkstrings.
> (11.13-15)
>
> Ho! with climbing sun, heading from cocoons,
> go bleached beldames, garnished in bargainbasements,
> (11.24-25)
>
> Hoy! with sunslope, shrieking over hydrants,
> flood from learninghall the lean fingerlings
> (p.15, 11.29-30)
>
> Sit after supper on smeared doorsteps,
> (1.37)

> Home again to hotbox and humid husbandhood,
> in slumbertrough adding sleepily to Anglekin.
> (11, 43-44)

The concrete Anglo-Saxon diction is particularly effective when it is used in some rather unusual metaphors or kennings. The street itself is referred to as a "tarred truckchannel" (1.9); flowing debris in the street is a "buttriver" (1.27); as cited above, the telephone wires are quite literally designated as "talkstrings".

Elsewhere the Anglo-Saxon verse form becomes the instrument of the poet's irony, as when the subject of racial prejudice is introduced; "Imperial hearts" find their "haven" in the squalor, though no Negroes or Jews are admitted, and the war slogans serve a more practical purpose than inspiring patriotism:

> Here is a ghetto gotten for goyim,
> O with care denuded of nigger and kike.
> No coonsmell rankles, reeks only cellarrot,
> ottar of carexhaust, carcorpse and cookinggrease.
> Imperial hearts heave in this haven,
> Cracks across windows are welded with slogans;
> <u>There'll Always Be An England</u> enhances geraniums,
> and <u>V</u>'s for a <u>Victory</u> vanquish the housefly.
> (11.16-23)

The filth and degradation of the streets and the people who live on it are here ironically paralleled by a more non-material vileness. The irony is perhaps too obvious, however, and for this reason its effectiveness is reduced.

"Slug in Woods" and "Anglo-Saxon Street" exemplify the attention to detail that is the hallmark of Birney's poetic technique. Such a statement is not intended as a value judgment praising all of his poetry. The success or failure of Birney's work as a whole is dependent upon a

consideration of individual works in themselves. What the two sections of this chapter have endeavoured to illustrate is that the poetic interests of Earle Birney, as manifested in his first volume of poetry, show a humanistic concern for the fate and condition of man. Simultaneously, man is seen in all of his smallness and in all of his greatness:

> We are a spark beleaguered
> by darkness...
> Yet we must speak, we the unique glowworms.[19]

Frequently, as we have seen, nature plays an important role in portraying the conflict and ambiguity of existence. When such is the case, man's life and the environment he has created are defined and described in relationship to it; occasionally, too, nature receives its definition from the world of man, as in the war poems.

In the chapter that follows, we shall consider in more detail the poetry relating to war and its effect on the human spirit. The source for the material will be the volume entitled Now is Time, published in 1945.

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[19]Birney, "Vancouver Lights", David, pp.36-37, ll. 19-25, passim.

Chapter 111

Now is Time

In this chapter, the war poems of the volume entitled Now is Time will be treated. Excluded from the discussion are those works which are reprinted from the previous volume, David and Other Poems. Now is Time is divided into three main sections: "Tomorrow", "Yesterday", and "Today". The plan of what follows has been dictated by the temporal division of the poetry itself under these headings. The subject of war is to be seen in the context of the poet's treatment of the human condition which has been introduced in the previous chapter.

The first division of the volume is the "Tomorrow" section. It contains five poems, all of which are pervaded by a sense of urgency and impending disaster; the urgency and threatening doom have their source in the poet's realization that time, for man, may be running out. Men must alter the present course of events if the world of tomorrow is to be free from armed conflict and its attendant horrors. Even though individual men may not survive to reap the fruits of what they sow, the effort to achieve peace must be made, if there is to be any hope for tomorrow. The poem entitled "Lines for a Peace" sets the tone not only for the first section but also for the entire volume; the concluding lines read:

> The hours flash below the sun
> and space is now and now is time
> to bed the beast and with the pain
> of love shock him to the brain-
> then certify the future sane.[1]

The beast of war can only be negated by love; any course of action that relies upon the use of armed might is insane:

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[1] Earle Birney, "Lines for a Peace", Now is Time (Toronto, 1945), p.5, ll.16-20.

This heart's a bud
that can explode to flower no gun
has puffed, our only governor
to check the paranoidal climb.
(11.12-15)

It is interesting to note here that the diction of the poem reinforces the notion of a future devoid of meaning and normality if love is not present: "paranoidal" and "certify the future sane" stress the insanity of war for which the "pain of love" is the only cure. So inimical to war is love, in fact, that it is compared to a shock treatment, at once painful and salutary.

The emphasis that the poet places upon the curative properties of love in "Lines for a Peace" is supported by an emotional plea for brotherhood in "Time-Bomb". The first and last stanzas of the poem continue the animal imagery introduced in the earlier work:

IN this friend's face I know
the grizzly still, and in the mirror;
lay my ear to the radio's conch
and hear the atom's terror.[2]

Within our politician's ribs,
within my own, the time-bombs tick.
O men be swift to be mankind
or let the grizzly take.
(11.9-12)

The effectiveness of the poem and especially the humanistic plea that is made in the second to last line appear considerably diminished by the final line itself. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the idea of war as the alternative to brotherhood and love is expressed too succinctly; it may also be that the image of the bear as an instrument of violence is stereotyped. Whatever the cause for the

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[2]Birney, "Time-Bomb", Now is Time, p.6, 11.1-4.

relatively poor quality of the poem, it is undoubtedly less effective than "Lines for a Peace", though the thematic continuity is sustained. In the second stanza, the best of the three, the poet sees the evils of war in nature:

> In each high stalk of wheat
> I watch osmotic rise of blood;
> through nightsky see new firedrakes hosed
> with light and lead.
> (11.5-8)

Here, the spilt blood of men is seen figuratively as nurturing the growth of wheat; the absorption through osmosis into the stalks from the earth gives an accurate reading of the level of violence and death. The Anglo-Saxon "firedrakes" or fire-dragons seems a most appropriate image for the picture of war in the sky. In order to avoid an overt lilting and melodic auditory effect in such a short poem, the poet suppresses the rhyme throughout the traditional a-b-c-b scheme. In the penultimate stanza he uses the consonantal "blood"/"lead" and in the last the imperfect "tick"/"take".

As has been indicated, the poet's answer to the precariousness of human existence as manifested in war and the possibility of war is love and human friendship. More specific aspects of these latter two ideals are presented in the poems "Status Quo" and "Man on a Tractor". In the former, greed, prejudice, poverty, and war are concomitant effects of one cause - selfishness:

> This mouth we teach to speak
> first of itself alone
> will conjure back the Belsen breath
> and raise a town of bone.[3]

---

[3] Birney, "Status Quo", Now is Time, p.3, 11.21-24.

The status quo is diametrically opposed to the main impetus of the entire volume, for to the mind's eye of the poet it represents all that is passive and inert; there must exist a desire on the part of men to attain to something beyond the absence of war. If this desire does not exist, then men will return to a world that is not aware of the meaning of altruism or love:

> NOW every spraying syllable
> veneering private gain
> shall gloss another farmboy for
> the toy-display of gain.
> (11.1-4)

In "Man on a Tractor" we have just the farmboy spoken of above in line three. The poet presents the thoughts of a man who has returned from war; he is one whose vision of the future is intermingled with reminiscences of war and the past. Former poverty, unemployment, and the death of his brother all force their way into his consciousness. Yet it is not the unpleasantness of the past that disturbs him:

> No there are no contortions of war that haunt him
> so much, he thinks, as the lengthening shadows of peace.[4]

As the poem continues, the meaning of the lines becomes clearer:

> This willing soil, and all his muscles, kindly seasons, the faith
> of a wife and the sweat of coming sons will not win,
> if the far lords of profit and price deny them.
> (11.41-43)

The man on the tractor symbolizes so many men who returned from the war, and indeed, all men who share in the fears for tomorrow which are part of human existence. Before the poem concludes, there is a

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[4]Birney, "Man on a Tractor", Now is Time, p.8, 11.34-35.

most explicit statement of the meaning of love and brotherhood, reduced to the simple yet profound terms of a farmer:

> Could he know that the crops from these smoking furrows,
> the ache in his back, the smile of his bride, were lines in the map of a reasoned future, of lands without private traps, or hidden mortars of class, or flame from the sky, then could he sit resolute on this tractor as once in a tank, and the bones of his brother have meaning.
> (p.10, ll.91-96)

There is a correspondence between such thoughts as these and the structure that the poem takes. The penetrating simplicity of the musings of the farmer finds its expression in a heavily-stressed free verse. There are hints of rimes from time to time, but no regular pattern exists; the imagery is scant and limited to such phrases as "the giant nostril of war" (p.7, l.26) and "the peacock Americans" (p.9, l.57). Relatively free of ornamentation, "Man on a Tractor" expresses "the deep desire of the common man...meditating as he ploughs his prairie wheatfield-for peace and justice."[5]

In the last poem of the "Tomorrow" section which will be treated here, the speaker of the lines is death. Since death is inevitable and comes to all men, it is the interval between birth and death that is important, although considered from the cold objective point of view of death, it really makes little difference when men die.

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[5] Brian Elliott, "Earle Birney: Canadian Poet", Meanjin, 78 (September, 1959), 343. While Elliott's analyses of individual poems are sometimes stimulating, I cannot agree that Birney posses an "easy national optimism" (p.338), although Elliott himself realizes that nationalism is not a criterion for judging Birney's or any poet's work.

> The difference is picayune
> scarcely a notch on the indicator,
> whether the young men come with me now
> or a few years later.[6]

The anti-climactic rhyme in line four stresses the offhand nature of death's remarks and emphasizes his indifference. If death were the only reality, then wars would not be really important, in that men killed are only claimed somewhat earlier than is customary. The true meaning of the poem is revealed in the final stanza:

> Continue to grow, if you wish,
> your dusty bushes of bombs
> or suck the shell's dug in your mouth
> - or come with paresis and psalms.
> (11.13-16)

In matter-of-fact language these lines present men the choice of living as they wish; they may produce instruments of war and be weaned on them. The alternative that death offers is to come to him in a state of mental aberration and abnormality, yet reciting psalms as in a procession. The juxtaposition of "paresis" and "psalms" tends to underscore the objectivity of death and the fact that psalm-singing does not negate its inevitability; the "paresis" of men requires a palliative and the psalms serve such a purpose.

While it would be false to consider the rather callous remarks of death as the final statement of the poet on the meaning of existence, they do emphasize the finality of dying. Taken in the context of "Status Quo" and "Man on a Tractor", the commentary of death is placed in its proper perspective.

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[6] Birney, "Remarks for the Part of Death", Now is Time, p.4, 11.1-4.

In the poems just discussed the emphasis has been upon men and war. The security of the future and the freedom of man from war reside in man's will to change, to live a life in which the motivating forces are love, selflessness and brotherhood. Because man is not immortal the urgency of the situation becomes apparent. If man is to go to his death having not merely survived, but lived, then he must act now. In the "Yesterday" section, the thoughts, emotions and sustaining motives of men actually in the war situation are examined. The number of poems in the section precludes a detailed analysis of each one individually. Certain works, therefore, will receive more extensive treatment than others; it is in no way implied that those necessarily neglected are of any less significance than those selected for closer scrutiny.

A number of the poems in this "Yesterday" group are united by the motif of remembrance of friends and loved ones in the past. The more gruesome aspects of war are made bearable by the memory of a kind deed, a loving face, or a soothing voice; in "The Road to Nijmegen", for instance, the only consolation in war is the hope that such people as the narrator remembers will continue to exist. Of the poems which explicitly mention the remembrance of times past, the first that we will consider is "Cadet Hospital". The narrator describes the sights and sounds that press upon him as he lies in a hospital bed:

> I LISTEN to the susurration of taxis
> sliding into the little holes of silence
> between the flak of our idiot radios.
> The hale roll past, who were our comrades;
> this night the dance, the graduation tomorrow,
> then the far shores and the devil's forge.[7]

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[7] Birney, "Cadet Hospital", Now is Time, p.21, ll. 1-6.

The alliterative sibilants of the initial lines convey the drone of the taxis from the streets and indicate the awareness that one has of alien noises in a hospital. The noise of war is introduced by the metaphor relating the radio and flak and in the last line cited, the "devil's forge" captures the fear and expectation of the future that is soon to become a reality for the young cadets. Soon, however, the noises fade:

> Now the cacophony somehow
> melts in the mead of a voice remembered.
> I shut my eyes and find the gentian
> of yours, and the gnawing under the cast
> is quieted by a touch from the past.
> (11.10-14)

Here the mood abruptly changes; the harsh sounds of "flak" and "idiot" are momentarily continued in the onomatopoeic "cacophony", but the initial "m's" of "melts" and "mead" and the medial "m's" of "remembered" effect the softness of sound associated with pleasant memories. It is on this tone that the poem concludes; the present recollection of a loved one gives rise to an act of thanksgiving:

> I shall never repay you for being alive
> somewhere out in this warm sweet night.
> (11.15-16)

In a poem entitled "For Steve", the poet stresses once again the value of past friendship and reaffirms the necessity for selflessness, which he introduced first in "Status Quo". The poem opens:

> I'll sit down again, Steve, with your shy ghost;
> many a night we'll talk of books or fishing,
> down a beer and slide our smothering toes
> from drillboots. We'll damn Canadian politicians
> and argue schemes to weld the human fissures
> that cleave the lanky land from which we grew.

> We'll reconnoitre confidences and lost wishes,
> and I'll come closer both to charity and truth,
> those hours, for sitting even with the shade of you.[8]

The remaining stanzas lament the death of the airman Steve, stress the ignorance of those who do not understand the cause for which he died, and portray the yoke of war which Europe must bear. A random sampling of lines will serve to illustrate the more horrid aspects of war. In describing the condition of Eurpoe, the poet writes:

> For you fall in a season of falling, in Europe's monstrous
> unending autumn, in the days when the earth sings
> like a mating frog, and squats to spit its long
> deft tongue and flick the frail brief wings.
> (p.31, 11.55-58)

The fact that the death of his friend Steve is but one of many occasions the following:

> No chimes
> of solace can achieve the decibels
> required for this one loss, still less for siren
> powered to sound all clear to all your fellows,
> Saxon or Anglosaxon, Tolstoy's kin or Raphael's.
> (p.30, 11.50-54)

Wherein, then, does the death of Steve receive its purpose and why did he die? The poet writes:

> Not for the dole, the family patent, the cartel,
> the abattoir whitewashed for each crop of earthlings,
> but for a peace, distant maybe as Arcturus,
> yet spinning white in the telescope of the heart.
> (p.32, 11.105-108)

It is the possibility of peace and the everpresent hope for peace that motivated Steve. The initial lines of the last stanza memorably transfer the burden of responsibility for peace to us, the survivors:

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[8] Birney, "For Steve", Now is Time, p.29, 11.1-9.

> I think you breathed the future and you died
> of it, and there alone's catharsis. No seed
> of hope can sprout but from the wounded side
> of selflessness. Since you who walked in freedom
> and the ways of reason fought on our front, we
> foresee the plot is solvable, the duel worthy.
> (p.33, 11.109-114)

The poem concludes on the note that until we do learn something from the death of Steve, then the degraded state of the world will continue to worsen:

> Meantime our stage will pile with poisoned years
> until we tell aright the prince's words,[9]
> and blood as proud as yours has built a prouder world.
> (11.115-117)

While there is no dominant image sustained throughout the thirteen stanzas of the poem, the concluding lines echo the reference to the stage and theatre made in the second stanza; the text of the latter reads:

> So here's no exorcizing. Mine the stagehand's dream
> to funnel wires into a magnavox, and lay
> the wires from your fading voice beneath
> the platform to the guards and the forgetful heir,
> blasting the porches of the ears with "Swear,"
> "Swear" and "Remember me." Forgive the haste,
> the home mechanics, prentice insulation;
> plays of blood revenge are all the rage
> again, and other spectres crowd us off the stage.
> (p.29, 11.10-18)

These lines assume particular importance when viewed in retrospect, following a reading of the poem's ending. If "plays of blood revenge are all the rage" then it is only through people such as Steve

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[9] This may possibly be explained as an allusion to Hamlet's speech to Horatio:

> If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart
> Absent thee from felicity awhile,
> And in this harsh world draw they breath in pain,
> To tell my story.
> (Hamlet, V, ii, 359-362)

that they are to be replaced. Analysis of the final stanza reveals the presence of "catharsis", "plot", "stage", and "blood". Thus, while not a dominant image, the world as stage is an important one, particularly when all that intervenes between the second and last stanzas is viewed as in some way depicting the bloodier aspects of revenge tragedy. The metre of the poem is a flexible one, varying from four to seven accented feet per line, usually in an iambic pattern; here also, as in so many of Birney's poems, the varied metre is combined with a variety of perfect and imperfect rimes.

The third poem to be considered under the heading of the remembrance of things past is "The Road to Nijmegen", perhaps, the finest work of the second volume. The poem begins:

> DECEMBER, my dear, on the road to Nijmegen,
> between the stones and the bitter skies was your face.[10]

Immediately, with these lines, the subject is broached and the contrast is established: the narrator is travelling on the road to Nijmegen and the bleakness of the landscape is contrasted with the memory of a loved one. The effectiveness of the beginning is due partially to the inversion of the word order in the second line and partially to the cryptic elliptical syntax. The verses immediately following line two vividly portray the squalor of a war-torn countryside:

> At first only the gathering of graves
> along the lank canals, each with a frosted
> billy-tin for motto; the bones of tanks
> beside the stoven bridges; old men in the mist

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[10] Birney, "Road to Nijmegen", Now is Time, p.42, ll.1-2.

knifing chips from a boulevard of stumps;
or women riding into the wind on the rims of their
cycles,
like tattered sailboats tossing over the cobbles.
(11.3-9)

Death, destruction, old age and degradation are thereby captured in a series of striking images. The poet writes, not of a cemetery, but of a "gathering of graves", implying perhaps the rather hasty and haphazard method of interment; the vowels and "l's" of "along the lank canals" extend the physical shape of the canals, particularly their length, into the phrase itself; tin cans are the only memorial to those who have died and the skeletons of tanks and destroyed bridges continue the imagery of death. The "old men in the mist", as they gather chips for their fires, evoke a mood of pathos, while the women on their bicycles seem to be as aimless as "tattered sailboats". But the horrors portrayed here are but a prelude to the picture of war's effect on the children of Holland:

These at first, and the fangs of homes, but more
the clusters of children, like flies, at the back of mess-
huts,
or groping in gravel for knobs of coal,
their legs standing like dead stems out of their clogs.
(11.10-13)

The children are at once reduced to the status of having to beg for their food and gather fuel as best they can. Already they seem to share in the lifelessness of their wooden shoes.

At this point, the poem assumes a more personal tone; the war is still present, but the descriptive nature of the lines cited above gives way to reflection on the purpose of the narrator's involvement in the war:

> Numbed on the long road to mangled Nijmegen,
> I thought that only the living of others assures us;
> we remember the gentle and true as trees walking,[11]
> as the men and women whose breath is a garment about
> us;
> that we who are stretched now in this tomb of time
> may remount like Lazarus into the light of kindness
> by a hold in the hands of the kind.
> (11.14-20)

While the personal memories continue, as above, the realities of war are never far away; such phrases as "mangled Nijmegen" and the stark metaphor, "this tomb or time", sustain the destruction and death of the earlier lines. Within the verses just cited, the men are given the courage to persevere, to continue through the war and the elements, by the memory of those they love; the numbness of the marching men is made easier to bear by the "garment" which is the breath of "gentle and true" men and women.

The concluding section of the poem particularizes the more general men and women spoken of in the previous lines:

> And so in the sleet as we neared Nijmegen,
> searching my heart for the hope of our minds,
> for the proof in the flesh of the words we wish,
> for laughter outrising at last the rockets,
> I saw the rainbow answer of you,
>
> of you and your seed who, peopling the earth, would distil
> our not impossible dreamed horizon,
> and who, moving within the nightmare Now,
> give us what creed we have for our daily crimes,
> for this road that arrives at no future,
> for this guilt
> in the griefs of the old and the graves of the young.
> (pp.42-43, 11.21-32)

---

[11] An allusion to Mark 8: 22-26 in which the blind man at Bethsaida is given his sight. Before vision is restored completely he says: "I see men as though they were trees, but walking about." v.24 The Holy Bible (New York, 1957 [1949]), p.60. See also l.13 cited above.

Already known intellectually, the reason for the misery caused by war, or the rationale for war, is only brought home to the narrator by the particular "you" (1.25). It is in the possibility of a world without conflict and war, inhabited by real people, that the degradation caused by war is bearable, though never justified or right. Indeed, the closing references to "nightmare Now", "daily crimes", "road that arrives at no future", "guilt", "griefs", and "graves" return one to the starkness of the description in the opening lines of the poem.

Another work on much the sam theme is "This Page My Pigeon". The initial lines recall the "nightmare Now" of "The Road to Nijmegen":

> THIS page is my pigeon sailing
> out of the blasted Now to you,
> my greenest past, my rivered future.[12]

The pigeon, a metaphoric embodiment of the printed word of the poet, is a messenger of love:

> See, round his leg snug, love's cylinder
>
> come from this world of wild undoing
> from all this quarrel of iron and growth.
> (11.4-6)

The poet next describes the instruments of war through which the pigeon must pass on his flight:

> Weaving by snake-pit of ack-ack and robot's
> roar-horror, up past the beautiful brutal
>
> bombers floating like flakes of mica,
> leaps my faithful feathered one, soars
> through the haired and dirty clouds of war,
> cleaving cleanly the self-centred sky.
> (11.7-12)

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[12]Birney, "This page My Pigeon", Now is Time, p.38, 11.1-3.

Here we have the image of "the self-centred sky" being broken by the messenger of love; as in so many of the poems previously analyzed, love and selflessness are synonymous for the poet. In the lines that follow, the flight of the pigeon must carry it through a world that is indifferent to the dangers it must encounter:

> Under apathetic suns and over
> the pointless ocean he arrows, off
> to the one unlosable loft.
> What does he say for me, what brings my homer?
> (11.13-16)

The message that the pigeon, representative of the poet's thoughts, conveys is concerned with the remembrance of a loved one from the past. As in "The Road to Nijmegen", where the narrator saw the "rainbow answer of you" (l.25), the pigeon

> Says that your voice still waters my memory,
> your eyes are leads to the wide light
> that will be. Swears you are part of the rightness
> of hills, the saneness of music and hemlocks.
>
> Says the giraffish dockweed, loneliness,
> was lopped away long ago, burned in your vaulting fire
> when first you gardened me. Now this gyring
> windstorm of absence whirls ashes up only.
> (11.17-24)

It is interesting to note that in "The Road to Nijmegen" and "This Page My Pigeon" the memory of people is inseparable from nature. The poet associates the pleasantness of people with those aspects of nature which give him joy. The conclusion of the poem sustains the bond and reiterates, as in "Cadet Hospital", the value of remembered people and emotion:

> Windseed is barren, takes no truehold
> in heart tendrilled tight with existence of you.
> (11.25-26)

This concept of receiving relative security or at least consolation from "Yesterday" is continued in such poems as "Within these Caverned Days" and "Invasion Spring". War appears as a most grim reminder of the precariousness of human existence; the poems just discussed are concrete examples of the various thoughts, moods, and emotions of men caught up in the reality of war, who must seize on to a concrete incident, an incident at least as real as the war around them, in order to survive. Chauvinism disguised as patriotism, avarice, and inherited prejudice are not palliated by being seen in the context of political, economic, or ethnic systems, but rather they are viewed as forces of evil which threaten real people in particular circumstances. Perhaps it is because the poet is only too aware of this reality that the poetry under consideration has such a sense of urgency and immediacy. As has been stated earlier, the poetry of Earle Birney does not appear to manifest an inclination for abstraction or philosophical speculation; this is not to say that his poems are not universally applicable. A poem's universality derives from its being valid in particular circumstances. In the case of the war poems there is an ever-present fear for the future because was is always possible; it is part of the ambiguity and insecurity of man's state. In this sense, therefore, the war poetry transcends the time in which it was written, as indeed most of Birney's poems do. It is from the terrible experiences of that time, moreover, that the urgency and immediacy of the poetry receives its impetus.

Even the poems of the "Today" section of the volume are

oriented toward the future. Although in these poems the war has ended, the peace is a precarious one:

> The fire of the people falls
> but over prairie and peak the grime
> of our living wreathes and appalls;
> the reeking smoke of our times
> clouds every peering eye, and the children's fists
> are smutted with history.[13]

Later in the poem, the poet stresses once again the paradoxical aspect of man's nature:

> We of the Janus brain, the jiving
> killer-creators, warring as pismires,
> and breeding more careless than ripples,
> move and glister again from the heart's eclipse.
> (11.12-15)

Men's divided natures have their parallel in the divisions that exist among the various ethnic groups:

> Like the girders of a great bridge rusting
> unassembled, obsecure in the dust
> of their stirring, lie
> the separate races of man.
> (11.24-27)

Returning once again to the theme of love, the poet remarks that peace cannot be merely a negative suspension of warring activities; but must be a vital positive force:

> Still the heart is a metal vibrant
> to love in his lightning searches.
> Within yet trembles our will
> to move as electrons alert to his passage,
> to rise from our dirt and fulfill
> the architect's message.
>
> If this thinning hate is all that hovers
> we are the blackened and the broken cables
> the flash of life leaps over.
> (p.54, 11.28-36)

---

[13] Birney, "Death of a War", Now is Time, p.53, 11.1-6.

In effect what the poet does in these concluding lines is to equate life and love; love is the true life force, the animating principle. The image of electricity conveys the dynamism of love and the power that it possesses; it is in the ability of man, in his will to be alert to the passage of love that the hope for the future lies. It does not lie in "thinning hate" alone, for quiescent hostilities are passive and inert. Love is the actualization of man's will to love and is essentially positive.

Thus, because the decision to love rests with man, the future is uncertain:

> The soldiers merge and move with all of us
> toward whatever mystery
> bemused that fatal pliant fish
> who first forgot the sea.[14]
> (11.19-22)

Whatever tomorrow holds, however, it cannot be avoided. As in "David", the path of the future depends upon the decisions man makes today; it is in his will to alter events that man's glory lies. This is true even if the choice, like Bob's, is a terrifying one. The inevitability of death does not obviate the perilousness of existence; in fact, man's greatest asset, his will, is inextricably bound to this ambiguity. Love and hatred, war and peace, define the choice that he must make; it is only in choosing love and peace now that he truly possesses life and not a mere waiting for death. No better summary of what has been said thus far in this chapter can be given than the words of Birney himself in the

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[14] Birney, "Young Veterans", Now is Time, p.55, 11.19-22.

last poem of Now is Time - "World Conference":

THE quiet diesel in the breast
 propels a trusting keel
whether we swing toward a port
 or crocodiles of steel.

The compassed mind must quiver north
 though every chart defective;
there is no fog but in the will,
 the iceberg is elective.[15]

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[15]Birney, "World Conference", Now is Time, p.56.

Chapter 1V

The Strait of Anian and Trial of a City

In the first section of the chapter that follows, we shall examine a representative selection of the poetry in the volume The Strait of Anian. The second section will contain a discussion of Trial of a City and various aspects of Earle Birney's experimentation with the language of poetry. It has seemed appropriate to introduce this latter subject at this point for the reason that Trial of a City sustains the thematic continuity of Birney's poetry and, at the same time, represents a new genre for the poet. Trial of a City, coming as it does midway in the poet's publications to date, serves as a vantage point from which to view the Anglo-Saxon verse of the past and the experimental nature of some of the poems in the succeeding volumes.

I

The Strait of Anian is a volume of selected poems published in 1948. It contains both old and new poems and it is to these latter that we shall turn our attention here. The verse continues to manifest the poet's emphasis upon the perilous condition of man and the glory of man's ability to alter events, to shape the future by using his will. Two poem's in particular, "Mappemounde" and "Ulysses", echo these sentiments and perpetuate the themes of such poems as "World Conference", "David", and "Time-Bomb."

"Mappemounde" is a short statement of the dangers that surround us as men: The opening lines read:

> NO not this old whalehall can whelm us,
> shiptamed, gullgraced, soft to our glidings.
> Harrows that mere more that squares our map.[1]

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[1] Birney, "Mappemounde", The Strait of Anian (Toronto, 1948), p.4, ll.1-3.

Immediately a contrast is initiated between the sea proper and another, as yet unidentified, sea. The ocean itself is depicted as an element of nature with which man is able to cope. "The mere that squares our map" is later identified as time: "That sea is hight Time, it hems all hearts' landtrace" (l.11). In their journey through life, men are surrounded by dangers symbolized by the mermen who lure the "seafarer's girl", nadders that with their funeral fires consume all happiness and joy, and Cetegrande:[2]

> that sly beast who sucks
> in with whirlwind also the wanderer's pledges.
> (11.9-10)

Despite the dangers that threaten us as men, we are obliged to proceed with our lives and exist with the hazards of time:

> Men say the redeless, reaching its bounds,
> topple in maelstrom, tread back never.
> Adread in that mere we drift to map's end.
> (11.12-14)

"Mappemounde" continues the Anglo-Saxon verse form that we have examined earlier. The rhythm varies from four to five stresses per line, and

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[2]The legend of the whale is wide-spread throughout the animal-lore of Europe; the following passage sheds some light upon Birney's allusion:

> Cethegrande is a fis,
> Ðe moste ðæt in water is;
> _____
> Vt of his ðrote it smit an onde,
> Ðe swetteste ðing ðat is o londe.
> Ðer-fore oðre fisses to him dragen,
> Wan he it felen he aren fagen;
> He cumen and hoven in his muð,
> Of his swike he arn uncuð.
> Dis cete ðanne hise chaueles lukeð,
> Dise fisses alle in sukeð;

(Taken from Bruce Dickens and R. M. Wilson, eds. "The Bestiary", in Early Middle English Texts. Rev. ed.) Bowes and Bowes (London: 1956 [1951]), p. 60, 11.57-58; 65-72. In the context of Birney's poem, those things given over to the wanderer in trust-his own life, goods, and children-are threatened by the monster, who lures the imprudent to him, sucks them in, and consumes them.

there is a heavy reliance upon alliteration. Moreover, the poem abounds with compound and archaic words; indeed, the poem begins with the kenning "whalehall", one of the more traditional Anglo-Saxon metaphors for the sea. By using an essentially concrete diction - "gullgraced", "face-charm"(1.8), "flamefanged" (1.7), "landtrace" - the poet is able to deal with a particularly abstract subject such as time in a manner that vividly depicts the all too real dangers that are so much a part of time and life.

The poem contains fourteen lines and bears some resemblance to the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet. Though the conventional division of the sonnet into the octave and the sestet does not exist, nor the formal rime, in content there is a change after line ten. The last four lines clarify the analogy made in the first part of the poem by identifying the sea as time and present the dangers applicable to all men.

"Ulysses", the second poem mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, was written in 1946 and in it the memory of the war is very much present. Ulysses, the hero of old, is paralleled by the modern man of arms. Both return home to a situation that is uneasy:

> MAKE no mistake sailor, the suitors are here,
> and the clouds are not yet quiet.
> Peace, the bitchy Queen, is back,
> (none too willing, and having to diet),
> but the girl of your heart has been knitting long.
> the boy-friends have arms, there may be a riot.[3]

Unlike the return of Ulysses in The Odyssey, the home-coming of today's

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[3]Birney, "Ulysses", The Strait of Anian, p.79, ll.1-6.

sailor has no epic poet's assurance that all will be well:

> Go canny, of course, but don't go wrong,
> there's no guarantee of an epic ending.
> (11.7-8)

Despite the unquiet peace and the clouds of war that linger still, the soldier must continue to live, for mankind has been reprieved once again:

> Soldier, keep your eye on the suitors,
> have a talk with your son and the old hired man,
> but the bow is yours and you must bend it
> or you'll never finish what Homer began.
> (11.13-16)

These final lines underscore once again an aspect of Birney's humanism that we have heretofore seen. Men inhabit an ambivalent world, one that is both good and evil. Through his will man is able to bend the bow to bring about peace and continue to live. As "World Conference" puts it: "there is no fog but in the will" (Now is Time, p.56, 1.7); it is left to man to be the master of his fate, and consequently, the master of the fate of the world. The power for good is in man's will to good.

In the remainder of this section we shall discuss the poems "From the Hazel Bough", "Winter Saturday", "Pacific Door" and "...Or a Wind". The first two of these reveal the more superficial aspects of man's life, while the latter manifest the optimism that is an essential part of Birney's vision of man. "From the Hazel Bough" begins:

> He met a lady
> on a lazy street
> hazel eyes
> and little plush feet[4]

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[4]Birney, "From the Hazel Bough", The Strait of Anian, p.13, 11.1-4.

Without preamble, this first stanza relates the central happening and introduces the rapid movement of the poem. The second stanza presents some rather light-hearted imagery and tells of watchers in the trees, while the third implies a secret love affair:

> her legs swam by
> like lovely trout
> eyes were trees
> where boys leant out
>
> hands in the dark and
> a river side
> round breasts rising
> with the finger's tide
>
> (11.5-12)

The next stanza consists of four similies, the last of which stresses the woman's superciliousness in contrast with her rotund appearance and gaiety:

> she was plump as a finch
> and live as a salmon
> gay as silk and
> proud as a Brahmin
>
> (11.13-16)

The story of this brief encounter is brought to an end with:

> they winked when they met
> and laughed when they parted
> never took time
> to be brokenhearted
>
> but no man sees
> where the trout lie now
> or what leans out
> from the hazel bough
>
> (11.17-24)

The poem's main concern would appear to be the superficial relationship of the man and the woman; central to such an interpretation are the final eight lines cited above. Never taking time to be really involved

with one another, except in a physical way, the couple of the poem can experience no heartbreak or sorrow, which is likely in any meaningful relationship. Their association has come to nought and a potential occasion for love has not materialized.

Reinforcing the theme are the rhythm and imagery; the rapid metre sweeps each unpunctuated line forward into the movement of the succeeding line. The cumulative effect of the two-stressed lines is one of lightness and gaiety. Equally frivolous is the imagery employed by the poet to describe the lady. Her feet are "plush" and "little"; her legs swim by "like lovely trout", and she herself is "plump as a finch" and "live as a salmon". Birney finds in the quick metre of the abbreviated ballad stanza and the flighty imagery, the rhythmic and metaphoric correlatives for the shallowness of the bond that exists between the man and the woman. In the final stanza, with its negative implications the poet through understatement, another traditional ballad technique, suggests an unspecified sinister finality.

In a sense the simplicity of form of "From the Hazel Bough" belies the profounder implications of the poem's theme. As we have indicated in the previous chapter, man's communion with other men is of paramount importance in Earle Birney's poetry. Put in its simplest terms, this communion is nothing other than love. The poem just discussed tells of the failure of two people to love; thus, their relationship comes to nothing. Nevertheless, such inability to love is part of the total picture of man and must be considered along with the success of others to achieve communion. W.E. Fredeman is quite

correct when he writes that there is in Birney's themes "a recurring pattern of idealized optimism and hope, fear, and idealized disillusionment and pessimism,..."[5]

Like "From the Hazel Bough", "Winter Saturday" depicts the more illusory and ephemeral nature of some of man's activities. The vehicle for this theme is an extended metaphor which compares the people of the poem to moths. The poem begins:

> FURRED from the farmhouse
> like catepillars from wood
> theyemerge, the storm blown out,
> and find in the Ford their cocoon.[6]

After the storm, they seek diversion and entertainment, just as moths are attracted to light:

> Through hardening duck and over
> the cold void impelled, they move
> to dreams of light and sound.
> Over drifts like headlands they go,
> drawn to the town's pink cloud,
> gliding unamazed through snow
> by the wind marbled and fluted.
> (11.5-11)

In their desire for the city lights, they overlook the natural beauty of their surroundings. The dancing and the movies prove to be a disappointment:

> But lights fail, time is false,
> the town was less than its glow.
> (11.18-19)

The cycle is now completed and the human moths must retire from the light and return whence they came:

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[5] Fredeman, 10.

[6] Birney, "Winter Saturday", The Strait of Anian, p.16, 11.1-4.

> Again in chrysails folded
> they must go lonely
> drowsy back through ghosts
> the wind starts from the waiting snow.
> (11.20-23)

In these concluding lines, the loneliness and emptiness of the people is paralleled by the unreal presence of the ghosts created by the wind and snow.

The beauty of this poem lies in its ability to sustain quietly the metaphor mentioned at the beginning of this analysis. Admirably suited to the dominant metaphor is the diction itself; witness the presence of "furred", "emerge", "hatch", "trembling", "flutter", "impelled", and "gliding". Such subtle half-rimes as "farmhouse"-"out, "wood"-"cocoon", "sound"-"cloud", contribute to the hushed tone of the poem; even the line, "the town was less than its glow" (1.19), which summarizes the disillusionment the town represents, is admirably suppressed and understated; the meaning of the poem is unobtrusively and non-didactically fused with the imagery, diction, and rhyme. While he is a poet with a "message", he is seldom a poet of direct statement and dogmatism; indeed, if he has a fault as a poet it is the fault of being, at times, too indirect and too succinet: E.J. Pratt, in a very favourable review of David and Other Poems, wrote that some works are too condensed - a "cryptic virtue which may so easily pass into a mannerism."[7]

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[7]E.J. Pratt, rev. of David and Other Poems, Canadian Poetry Magazine, Vol. V1, No.4 (March, 1943), 35.

Before concluding this section, we have as yet two more poems to deal with. The first of these is entitled "Pacific Door" and the second, "...Or a Wind". It is from a line of the former that the volume takes its name and both poems can be viewed as counter-balancing the rather pessimistic view of man manifested in "From the Hazel Bough" and "Winter Saturday". Neither of the two poems is naively optimistic, but both illustrate the poet's belief in man's ability or potential to achieve communion and freedom. "Pacific Door" begins with the ominous lines:

> THROUGH or over the deathless feud
> of the cobra sea and the mongoose wind
> you must fare to reach us.[8]

We eventually infer that the pronoun "us" of the third line refers either to the coastal regions of the Pacific coast of Canada or, more probably, the people who inhabit them. As the poem proceeds, a list of the great explorers, Drake, Cook, Bering, Vancouver, and anonymous Spaniards, is presented. The reason for these historical references is apparent: the physical dangers and hazards of the explorers become the occasion for the poet's humanistic concern:

> Here Spaniards and Vancouver's boatman scrawled
> the problem that is ours and yours,
> that there is no clear Strait of Anian
> to lead us easy back to Europe,
> that men are isled in ocean or in ice
> and only joined by long endeavour to be joined.
> (11.19-23)

The physical separation of men by the boundaries of geography and nature is here symbolic of an even greater separation of the spirit -

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[8]Birney, "Pacific Door", The Strait of Anian, p.37,11.1-3.

the absence of whatever ideals and bonds make men one. While we have seen this theme before, it is interesting to note its recurrence here in this form: the historical past is used for the presentation of a humanistic truth, and anticipates to some degree the approach of the verse of the last two volumes which will be discussed later in this thesis.

Line twenty-three of the passage cited above once again brings Birney's emphasis upon the will of man into focus. The poem "...Or a Wind" does much the same, but with an approach that is little seen in the canon of his poetry. Here we see Birney in a Shelleyan manner assuming the role of prophet or seer. Man is identified with the wind:

> Somehow, still, we may blow straight,
> come flowing into the couloir's caves,
> funnelling into the gullies, battering
> the bright rock with the hail of our will.[9]

The prophetic tone of the concluding lines, despite the tentative "may", is strong and vigorous:

> O we may yet roar free, unwhirl,
> sweeping great waves into the deepening bores,
> bringing the ocean to boom and fountain and siren,
> tumbling the fearful clouds into a great sky wallowing,
> cracking the mountain apart-
> the great wind of humanity blowing free, blowing
> through,
> streaming over the future.
> (11.13-19)

In writing of Trial of a City, to be discussed shortly, R.E. Rashly makes a point that is equally valid for the lines just cited and, indeed, for most of Birney's poetry:

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[9]Birney, "...Or a Wind", The Strait of Anian, p.81, 11.9-12.

> ".. the future is whatever man makes it to be. Life is not fixed, then, in a pattern imposed on it from without, nor contained forever in the accomplishment of the present...the lessons of the depression and the wars have made it possible to see that what it [the future] becomes must implement the faiths of common love and social justice."[10]

The poems discussed in this section, from "Mappemounde" to "...Or a Wind", all reflect Birney's over-riding thematic preoccupation with man and the world that man has created, and the world that man will create in the future. Hope and fear, optimism and pessimism, are delicately balanced and weighed one against the other; the factor determing what will prevail is man's volition. Trail of a City further illustrates the poet's humanistic concerns and provides us with a new genre and an interesting use of language; it is to this new medium that we now turn.

II

As has been mentioned earlier, Trial of a City exposes the reader to two of the more salient aspects of Birney's poetry. On the one hand it continues the humanistic trend of the poems of the earlier volumes, while, on the other, it is illustrative of Birney's penchant for technical experimentation, for these reasons it has been singled out from the other poems of the volume in which it appears. We have previously seen the experimental aspect of the poet's work in such

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[10] R.E. Rashley, Poetry in Canada (Toronto, 1958), p.143.

poems as "Anglo-Saxon Street", "War Winter", and "Mappemounde". In the remainder of this chapter we shall attempt to account for Birney's interest in the older verse form and to see this Anglo-Saxon verse in the context of his poetry as a whole. It will be necessary, therefore, to look ahead to a number of examples from the succeeding volumes, Near False Creek Mouth and Ice Cod Bell or Stone. To avoid duplication, however, the poems of these latter two volumes treated here will not be discussed when we come to examine the same volumes in the next chapter.

Trial of a City is a verse drama in which the city of Vancouver is called upon to justify its existence at a public hearing. The plaintiff is the Office of the Future, represented at the proceedings by Gabriel Powers, Q.C. The counsel for the city itself is P.S. Legion. Presiding over the hearing is the Minister of History of the Freed State of Columbia, who rules that only the dead are neutral, and, consequently, it is from their ranks that the witnesses must be drawn. (The court has the power to materialize and dematerialize them at will.) Captain George Vancouver, an Indian Chief, Dr. E.O. Seen (a professor of geology, who, though not really dead, is considered such), Gassy Jack Deighton (an inhabitant of early Vancouver), and Long Will of Langland are called upon to testify. The testimony given does not augur well for the city and it appears destined for destruction until the trial is interrupted by a living housewife. Mrs. Anyone is permitted to testify off the record; she movingly asserts the joy and value of living in Vancouver. Half-way through her appeal,

the hearing is adjourned and judgement is reserved sine die. The city is saved and the play ends on a tentatively optimistic note.

Such is a skeleton outline of Trial of a City. The drama is a satire upon the materialism of modern life, as epitomized in the city of Vancouver and the arguments Mr. Legion raises to defend it. It is only because of the positive assertion by the housewife, of the joy of living that the city is allowed continued existence. Much of the satire, and therefore much of the humour, of the play come from the more improbable aspects of the work itself. The time of the play, for example, is "five years later"; adding to the ludicrousness of the situation is the stipulation that only the dead may testify. But perhaps the single greatest source of humour is the language of Gabriel Powers, Q.C., the counsel for the prosecution:

> Treason or true, the Office of the Future
> finds this city-pretty now a misfate
> in its planes. Like every think of booty,
> sir, it's copulated to destriction;
> its lifeliness decreases and must ever
> pass into nothingmist. Your town's dimnition
> is, I fear, both inevoidable and everdue.[11]

Mr. Legion's objection to such doubletalk was ruled upon by the Minister of History as follows:

> I'm afraid, Mr. Legion, you'll have to cash Mr. Powers' words at par. Mr. Powers has been briefed by the Office of the Future and must use its language. It's not his fault if English changed again.
> (11.9-11)

Mr. Powers continually interjects such language and humour throughout the all-important testimony of the witnesses. At the end of Captain

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[11] Earle Birney, Trial of a City, Trial of a City and Other Verse (Toronto, 1952), p.4, 11.14-20. Hereafter cited by page and line reference in the body of the text.

Vancouver's remarks, he sees no need for cross examination, since the Captain has said enough to damn Vancouver:

> The Future then need ask the nimble Captaive nowhat;
> he cut and ran long since, and never planned nor recks
> this beaching, never cares that we have come to
> bury Moby not appraise him.
> (p.10, 11.29-32)

In this instance, Birney, through Powers, alludes to the funeral oration of Anthony and Moby Dick, just as in the lines cited earlier he alludes to Keats' "Endymion". In other cases, the neologisms do not parody famous lines of literature, but they are still the source of much humour-as when two or more words are combined in verse or prose that is not as nonsensical as the defending attorney would have the court believe. After questioning Professor E.O. Seen("Eocene"), Mr. Powers states his point:

> You hear. To blow this vain Mancover skywards now
> is to advanquish by a jingle comic second
> what Adamizing Father Sun once planned.
> (p.25, 11.15-17)

We have seen earlier how Birney created neologisms on the Anglo-Saxon pattern. In Trial of a City he combines words to enrich the language of his poetry. Frequently too, the escape from a more conventional idiom provides a source of humour that could not be attained ordinarily. In the lines just cited, "Mancover" (manhole-cover) suggests both Vancouver and humanity-man-being buried or covered; "advanquish" contains the ideas of both "advance" and "vanquish", while "Adamizing" implies that the sun is both the source of or father of life and its destroyer ("A-damnizing"/ "Atomizing"). In a similar vein, Powers had previously objected to a

statement by the defense attorney with:

> Objaculation, Mr. Minister! My wordy friend
> sleeks to mislead the captain into thinking-thanking
> bleak is white or grade disgrade, and every needive snug
> in his Prochristean bed.
> (p.9, 11.24-27)

Frequently the language of Trial of a City is presented in Middle-English and Anglo-Saxon patterns. When Will of Langland testifies it is appropriately in a form very close to the Middle-English verse of Piers Plowman:

> I saw the Seven Sinners soaring from your airports,
> heading up in haste to overhaul the honest,
> to comb at will the prone land, the long comely nation,
> that n'er is long nor fair enough to end their lust for rifling.
> (p.35, 11.6-9)

At the end of his testimony, Will summarizes all he has said regarding the present state of Vancouver. In so doing he is the medium for the poet's belief in love and truth:

> Nay, but lacking love, all this living's lifeless,
> love, too, of truth, and for our children's children,
> joy in giving joy, and gaining love by loving,
> lust of peace and fair thoughts, and loyalty to man.
> Though many walk fat and proud thy folk are sick with fear,
> taking the time's toys and trashing all the future,
> lunatic in laughter, lost in mere getting,
> and haunted by a skydoom their own hates have dealt...
> (p.40,11.9-16)

The testimony of the modern geologist, Professor E.O. Seen, is delivered in the alliterative four-stressed lines of Anglo-Saxon:

> Since brown longheads leaped across Bering
> slid down these coasts spearing the salmon
> hardly two hundred centuries have hovered.
> Man, sir, this morning moved down to visit.
> (p.24, 11.20-23)

Before the final scene in which the housewife enters, the prosecuting attorney has had the advantage. Ostensibly, there is no hope for Vancouver, since even the defense counsel, Mr. Legion, is himself the victim of the materialism of modern living. He does not lament the degradations imposed upon the Indian by the white man, nor is he fearful of the pollution, squalor, and vice that tend to accompany urbanization. All the witnesses, from Captian Vancouver to Long Will of Langland, have, in varying degrees, testified that the city's redeeming features are few. Moreover, the language of Gabriel Powers, the prosecutor, tends to confuse the all-too-logical and materialistic Mr. Legion.

When Mrs. Anyone enters upon the scene, it is with the voice of both practicality and emotion:

> I woke today with my husband
> To the bronze clashing of peaks,
> To the long shout of the ocean,
> And the blood alive in my cheeks.
> Though the jetplanes drew their chalklines
> Over my blackboard sky
> The eraser sun undid them
> And a mastering hawk walked high.
> Two flickers knocked on a cedar's door
> Three finch ran fugues through the wind
> And the scent of primula moved in my world
> However my world had sinned.
> (p.42, ll.17-28)

Her defense of the city of Vancouver is not like that of Legion; in fact, she disclaims any relationship with him:

> I am the cool Vancouver's kin, not yours
> And the fosterdaughter to that Headman mild;
> In the professor's logic I am woven,
> By the rank sailor's flesh my mind is cloven
> And I am yet the priestly plowman's child.
> For all mankind is matted so within me
> Despair can find no earthroom tall to grow;

> Under the glittering comment of the planets
> Life asks, and I am made to give.
> (p.43, 11.7-13; 18-19)

Legion admires the rhetorical ability of the housewife and wants the tourist bureau to print copies of her speech. At this point, Mrs. Anyone has the clerk de-materialize him after the fashion of the dead witnesses. The hearing is now adjourned and judgement post-poned. Finally, only Mrs. Anyone and Gabriel Powers remain. The dialogue that ensues reveals the housewife as a worthy opponent of the counsel for the Office of the Future. She adheres to the position that the future has no authority over her because:

> The only future's what I make each hour.
> (p.46, 1.4)

The concluding section of their conversation, or, more aptly, their debate, affirms the housewife's belief in life:

> POW-But Lady, lady, I threaten everthelease.
>
> WOM-How could I know, without the threat of death, I lived?
>
> POW-But do you know why you defy me?
>
> WOM-That you might also be.
> Without my longer Will, my stubborn boon,
> You'd have no mate to check with but the cornered moon.
> It's my defiant fear keeps green my whirling world.
> (p.47, 11.4-10)

The language experimentation of Earle Birney in Trial of a City and the neologisms of the Anglo-Saxon verse have their precursors in the writings of such people as William Barnes and James Joyce. The former was primarily a linguist whose main concern was to rid the English language of the influence of foreign tongues. He suggested

that Anglo-Saxon English was quite capable of being self-sufficient and offered numerous neologisms to replace the abstractions and unnecessary complexities of Latinized English. Willis D. Jacobs gives a list of some of the words that Barnes wished to substitute for the vocabulary already existing:

Ancestor.	Fore-elder, kin-elder.
Anniversary.	Year-day.
Anninilate.	To fornaughten.

Conjunction.	Link-word.
Correlative(words).	Mate-words.
Deciduous.	Fallsome.
Democracy.	Folkdom.[12]

While the neologisms of Barnes and Birney bear some resemblance to each other-both utilize concrete Anglo-Saxon forms-the purposes for which the new words are created are completely different. Barnes was a man whose life was devoted to his philologic and linguistic concerns. His purpose, therefore, was more scientific than Birney's; he sought to purge and revitalize the English Language. While he did write a considerable amount of poetry, very little or none of it reflects his linguistic innovations.

Birney's purpose, on the other hand, is primarily to vary his poetic technique. There is no interest in reviving Anglo-Saxon or in creating neologisms on an Anglo-Saxon pattern per se. Seen within his work as a whole, "Anglo-Saxon Street", "War Winter", "Mappemounde" and the language of Gabriel Powers reflect the vigor that animates much of

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[12] William Barnes, "Speech-Craft" in Willis D. Jacobs' William Barnes: Linguist: University of New Mexico Press (Albuquerque, 1952), p.50.

Birney's poetry. It is because the poet experiments with different verse forms and language that his poetry strikes the reader as forceful and diversified.

Birney's use of Anglo-Saxon and neologism is not, however, new, even within the area of literature itself. In Ulysses James Joyce had written:

> In ward wary the watcher hearing come that man mildhearted eft rising with swire ywimpled to him her gate wide undid. Lo, levin leaping lightens in eyeblink Ireland's westward welkin! Full she dread that God the Wreaker all mankind would fordo with water for his evil sins.[13]

The alliteration and the archaic Middle-English diction resemble Birney's own efforts along these same lines. In Finnegan's Wake Joyce was to carry his experiments much farther than in Ulysses; by combining and re-combining the words and roots of English and other languages, he eventually arrived at a prose medium that was rich in its connotative and associative implications. One of Birney's more recent poems shows the possible influence of the later Joyce; that is, the Joyce of Finnegan's Wake. In Near False Creek Mouth, we find the poem "Orphiasco", the language of which is Joycean, even though its subject matter parodies that of Ivy Compton-Burnett:

> Heil said the Ditchess
> entering without knottering
> then cratching a match
> on the sharp little theme-nail
> of her mind
> dizappeared
>
> The stick remained silkily
> flaming rubbing a snatch
> of tawny lips together in a way
> that had always emblazoned the Duke

---

[13] James Joyce, Ulysses (Mod. Lib. Ed.: New York, 1934), p. 379.

& would have again if his second
fanger hadnt been exploring Joyce
the first polarmaid so finglemindedly

he never twigged that her Grewce
had meanwhile descended to Haides
till he saw the kinked
nack of the match lying
cold
on his paved intensions[14]

It is not implied that Birney's use of the pun and of neologism is as sustained as that of Joyce. Of interest, however, is the fact that Birney is in a tradition that embodies one of the dominant concerns of the writers of this century. He, like many of his contemporaries, is concerned about finding a language for poetry that is vital and alive. Certainly Barnes and Joyce are at opposite ends of the language spectrum: the former sought to maintain English pure and undefiled, while the latter sought to enrich it through amalgamation. But both men, one in the nineteenth and the other in the twentieth century, are modern examples of that interest in language which is still prevalent today.

Though Birney, as a poet, takes no sustained interest in creating a completely new language, he does not take the diction of his craft lightly. The dominant concern of his poems is man; the linguistic and other resources on which he draws in expressing his humanism are multitudinous and varied. Never content with one form or mode of expression, he is constantly seeking new methods of presentation and it is this to a considerable degree, which gives his work the vigor mentioned above.

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[14]Birney, "Orphiasco", Near False Creek Mouth, p. 72.

His later poems continue the variety that we have already seen, although here the affiliation is more perhaps with concrete poetry-certainly with the typographical experiments associated with E.E. Cummings. We might do well to look at one of these later poems, "Njarit", as indicative of the eclectic quality of Birney's work. It begins:

> From moonwastes of lava
> brighT t t air twistS down a mile of b a r a n c a 15

Here the sense of the opening lines is paralleled structurally by the downward movement of the type itself. The motion soon becomes more horizontal and the emphasis is as much upon the colour of the landscape as the motion:

> silvering on the way the quiet eM t H at
> S pR aW ls to solve the eq=ations of
> buried
> pyram ids and sink s dew HEa Vy and
> dULLing over the le a ky palme t to
> roofs
> (11.3-6)

Just as "barranca: in the opening lines visually depicts the steep

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[15] Birney, "Njarit", Ice Cod Bell or Stone (Toronto, 1962), p.42, 11.1-2.

side of a ravine, so too is "Mesquite" typographically rendered in the form of a tree or grass, and "sprawls" is written as its meaning indicates. The same can be said of "eq=ations", "pyramids", and "sinks". The capitalized letters in "heavy" and "dulling" serve to re-enforce onomatopaeically the logical sense of the diction by stressing the dominant sound of each word ["HE V" and "ULL"]. The typography of the first half of the poem is undulating and rather free in form, thereby stressing the essentially unstructured nature of the vista. In the lines which we are about to examine, the type assumes a more rigid and sharply defined structure, in keeping with the pejorative opinion which the poet holds of the inroads of modern civilization:

> Only a roun d the asTOUNdinG ochre/and/ash
>
> white of the a/esuohoohcsyra
> b o r
> so l ute l yc nempo
> t
>
> and the bLACk CE of the coffeewarehouse
> UB
>
> and the (blank) tyrotça
> obaccof
>
> is the air brigh T again and haRRRD
> T
>
> and l u U U n a t t tt T ttttttttt tic
>
> (11.7-12)

Upon deciphering the more difficult form of the type in these lines, we find that the "absolutely contemporary schoolhouse", the "cube of the coffeewarehouse", and the "tobacco factory", all share the rigid and unimaginative lines of the worst in contemporary architecture. Capitalization and repetition in "bright", "hard" and "lunatic" indicate that in these concluding lines the poet is also concerned with an

auditory harshness to accompany the visual sterility.

"Njarit" can be seen, thematically as continuing the humanism of the early poems and Trial of a City. It also anticipates the concern with which Birney views the confrontation of modern society and a culture such as that of Mexico's. The city of Vancouver in Trial represents all that is wrong with contemporary man; in essence, it is to be associated with the schoolhouse and the tobacco factory of the Mexican town in "Njarit". Like the Anglo-Saxon verse, Trial of a City and "Njarit" manifest Earle Birney's interest in the rhythn and structure of language and poetry; though his poems impel us to take into account his relationship to such men as William Barnes and James Joyce, in the area of poetic technique he is no man's disciple and his originality may lie in the fact that he is a poet of many traditions and great variety.

Chapter V

Ice Cod Bell or Stone and Near False Creek Mouth

The most obvious feature of the two last volumes of Birney's poetry, which will be treated in this chapter, is the foreign orientation of the poems. Both Ice Cod Bell or Stone (1962) and Near False Creek Mouth (1964) contain a large number of poems whose setting and background may be somewhat alien to the North American reader. Nevertheless a consideration of the poetry in itself is possible and, as has been stated earlier, is one of the primary concerns of this thesis.

A study of these foreign poems reveals the poet's sustained interest in men and mankind; to this extent, these poems do not appear as departures from those of the earlier volumes, but rather as further specific manifestations of the poet's concern with men everywhere. The experience is no less universal merely because the setting is localized. Many of the poems are written from the point of view of the poet as outsider, as tourist, so that the poem itself is more amenable to our North American sensibilities insofar as we ourselves share the same aesthetic and cultural background as the poet. The description of and commentary on the human condition in different countries reveals the similarity of all men everywhere, who must struggle to survive and to preserve their human dignity.

Like much of the poetry hitherto discussed, the poems of Ice Cod Bell or Stone and Near False Creek Mouth may be classified as works of social comment. It is necessary, however, to reiterate

a point that has been made previously; the poems as individual statements are best viewed in the perspective of the ambiguous or dual nature of man himself. The poet's immediate concern is with particular men who are born, endure the hardships of life and possess its joys, and then die. There are no doctrinaire solutions to the problem; men have created the injustices present in the world and they can be resolved chiefly by man's will to love and respect his fellow men. Individual men may fail and others may succeed, but at least men must be aware of what is wrong and attempt to put things right.

The two volumes of poetry to be considered here are best treated separately since the poems of Near False Creek Mouth have an organization inherent in the volume itself. Of the poems in Ice Cod Bell or Stone, twelve have their setting in Mexico, five in Asia, and various others in such widely separated areas as Honolulu and Ellesmereland. Certain poems such as "Captain Cook", "El Greco: Espolito", "Vitus Bering", and "Can.Lit.", further illustrate that the later poetic interests of Earle Birney are associated more directly with man than with man and nature. There is less concern with the confrontation of man and nature and more concern with man himself in society in a time of peace.

Probably the most direct commentary on the social injustice and oppression that some men are forced to endure is the poem

entitled "The Travelling Workers Curse", in the volume Ice Cod Bell or Stone. In the poem a group of migrants are forcibly driven from the property of a wealthy landowner in whose brook they wish to bathe:

> He says it
> With clubs, this landowner's toady,
> "Back from that brook, no trespassing here!
> On your way, prowlers, yes you, all five,
> This ain't no bathtub for you bastards!
> This stream's clean, not for bums to dive in."[1]

The colloquial and forceful language of the guardian is answered in kind by the offended workers:

> At night give him only this running
> Stream for blanket, for fleas frogs afloat,
> So many his own darling daughter
> Sits picking them from her petticoats.
> May a dredger tear through his sleeping,
> Wake him greenish as pool-scum, and wet,
> Then wash him away with his creek-trolls,
> Away in the swash of his own sweat! "
> (p.27,11.33-40)

The curse itself, of which the above lines are the culmination, is notable for its spontaneity and concreteness. There is no extended tirade against the system of landholding as such, but rather a very natural response to a provoking situation. The denial of a swim in the brook gives rise to a series of pronouncements against the boss, couched in terms relating to the brook on his property:

> The thatch over his head be water
> And liquid planks under foot for his health.
> (11.23-24)

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[1] Earle Birney, "The Travelling Workers' Curse", Trans. "from the Hungarian of Attila Jozsef" by Ilona Duczynska, Ice Cod Bell or Stone (Toronto,1962),p.26, 11.11-16.

Let them be frothy seas he must smoothe
With his fancy iron-toothed harrow.
Let them be lank stalks of rain he grows,
Reaps, stacks, he and his boy-farrow.
(11.25-28)

Undoubtedly the effectiveness of some of the curse is lost due to the fact that the poem is Englished from the Hungarian. For example, the lines

For boots
Let him pull on the holes in the dike.
(11.31-32)

are somewhat alien to our sensibilities and imagination. However, the extremely vivid and apt descrption of the guard would appear to lose very little in the translation:

Bellowing strides the brook's watchman,
Hero of creeks, bullfrog's bullyboy,
Apprentice water-troll.
(11.9-11)

The lines contain just the right amount of ironic exaggeration ("Hero of creeks") and deflation ("Apprentice water-troll") to enable us to appreciate the feelings of the workingmen toward the boss's hireling.

Quite a different poem is the second of two works by Mao-tse-Tung which the poet put into poetic form from translations by Ping-ti Ho. "Snowscape from a Plane" possesses the same direct conversational tone as "The Travelling Workers' Curse", but the language itself is that of a man whose sensibilities differ from those of the workers:

> How northern clean is this vision!
> Below, a thousand miles are sealed with ice,
> ten thousand around us are whirling with snow.
> Look, from the Long Wall's either flank
> only a vast wildering stretches now;[2]

The lines here cited contain a vigor not unlike that of the former poem, though the tone is more descriptive than vituperative. If anything, the first half of "Snowscape" is more poetic, in the sense that the poetic is frequently associated with what is visionary. Particularly striking are the lines:

> Silver serpents are dancing on the mountains,
> wax elephants prance over the high plains,
> and we would measure our own soaring with the skyloft.
> (11.8-10)

In the snow being blown by the wind, the poet conjures up snakes and elephants; the narration from the vantage point of a plane enables him to see better the beauties around and below him and to reflect upon the perfectibility and aspirations of men, who all too often impose needless limitations upon their ability to attain their goals.

In the second section of the poem, the heroes of the past are seen to have their limitations, despite their greatness. The emphasis is upon the present and the possibility of an even greater personage and leader emerging:

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[2]Birney, "Snowscape from a Plane", Trans. from the Chinese of Mao Tse Tung by Ping-ti Ho, Ice Cod Bell or Stone, p.31, 11.1-5.

and even he who was Heaven's proud son throughout a generation,
Jenghiz Khan,
could bend his bow only to bring down a gyrfalcon.
These have all gone.
But in assessing the glamorous ones
wait - let us see who rises this morning.
(11.21-26)

What seems to emerge from the poem is the belief on the part of the poet, Mao, that evaluations of great people in the past can never be absolutely conclusive, for the past is viewed in a different perspective with each new day. The "glamorous ones" of the past must be viewed in the light of the present and the great men of today. Birney finds in Mao's poem a view of man that is consonant with his own emphasis upon the will of man to improve upon the past and create a better world.

A somewhat more sardonic view of history, particularly Canadian literary history, is presented in the poem "Can.Lit.":

Since we had always sky about,
when we had eagles they flew out
leaving no shadow bigger than wren's
to trouble our most aeromantic hens.
Too busy bridging loneliness to be alone
we hacked in ties what Emily etched in bone.
We French, we English, never lost our civil war,
endure it still, a bloodless civil bore;
no wounded lying about, no Whitman wanted.
It's only by our lack of ghosts we're haunted.[3]

The poem owes its vigor to the terse compact phrasing and the rather trenchant humour. In the opening four lines it is stated that there was always the subject matter for poetry, but the poets - ironically

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[3]Birney, "Can. Lit.", Ice Cod Bell or Stone, p.18.

called "eagles" - in fact produced little or nothing of great merit; the hens who long to fly but cannot are the critics or aspiring poets who have only a mediocre literature to criticize or emulate. In lines five and six the phrase "Too busy bridging loneliness to be alone" stresses the physical isolation of Canadians from one another; the means taken to overcome the loneliness, specifically works of literature, partook of the burly nature of hewing wood rather than the more finely crafted and durable accomplishments of one such as Emily Dickinson. The last two couplets of the poem contrast the American civil war with the bloodless and lacklustre hostilities of the two major ethnic groups in Canada. It is implied that because there was no such decisive action as that in the United States, then there was no need - nor indeed the possibility - of a Canadian equivalent of Walt Whitman. It is only by a dearth of ghosts that Canadians are paradoxically haunted.

The poet feels the emptiness resulting from a lack of cultural history and heritage. In a semi-serious, satirical mood, he views man's present as being affected, in this case detrimentally, by his past or rather his lack of one. This alienation is characteristic of a number of contemporary poets, but particularly of a poet writing from the background of a country that is still searching for its national identity. Whether or not this lack of a

sense of identity with the past accounts for Birney's turning to foreign cultures and milieux is a moot point, but the fact of his doing so cannot be denied. It is to the poems in which he does this, especially the poems of Mexico, that I should now like to turn.

The first of these is a descriptive poem entitled "State of Sonora". The overall impression that the reader gets of the country-side is that of a sun-baked, harsh land in which life is difficult:

> By noon sun cakes
> and over the river's skeleton
> trucks flash and rattle
> under a glassy sky. Life crusts,
> a shell,
> on the surface or, like scale, flakes.
> Around the prickly
> pear to the tarmac
> boys skip like chestnuts,
> naked, or stricken
> wither to death across adobe sills.[4]

In the above lines the use of such words as "skeleton", "rattle", "crusts", "shell", and "flakes" portrays the bare sparse nature of the land. When human life is introduced in the person of the boys, it is "naked", "stricken", and withering. The unusual simile which compares the boys to chestnuts captures the brittleness of the ground upon which they are playing; heat and the barrenness of Sonora are associated with either a meagre existence or death. The life of

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[4]Birney,"State of Sonora", Ice Cod Bell or Stone,p.40, 11.7-17.

the shepherds and goatherds is as harsh as the land in which they live:

> men pad weeklong after lean
> sheep and flinteyed goats through crack
> of thin dust between
> the joints of cactus-
> armoured land.
> (11.23-27)

Relief, if it may be termed such, only comes occasionally:

> Then in a Sunday of brassbands
> and firecrackers
> dance on slaphappy huaraches
> through cobbled plazas
> till they drop down
> drunk to sleep on the radiant highway
> with scrannel chickens and bony cows.
> (11.28-34)

The men who eke out an existence on the land are paralleled by those who make their living at sea. The heat of the land is not escaped and their condition as men has the same aura of timeless futility that pervades the life of all those who suffer under the relentless sun:

> the fishermen turn backs gnarled
> as turtles on the day sizzling
> into the sea of Cortez
> and point home for the lights diamonding
> in chalky huts on the timeless
> cliffs, their stark boats slapping
> over the flattening rollers that smack
> and are bounced back
> by the guano-glazed islands.
> (p.41, 11.46-54)

The sun which is so necessary for life is also the source of the dryness and oppressive heat that afflict the land and its peoples.

As we have already indicated, the diction of the poem is so chosen as to stress the hardness and crusting of the earth and the local inhabitants. Structurally, the time sequence of the poem is dependent upon the sun, for what the poem presents is a day like so many others for the people of the State of Sonora. At the beginning of the poem, the early morning rains are described:

> Thin country with the bright hard
> hide. Rain richochets from adamantine
> ranges, where wild peccaries
> scrabble, and clatters intact down baked
> ravines with morning shard
> of culverts and swart hill pine
> back to the sea.
> (11.1-7)

The life-giving rain is unable to penetrate the soil, runs off, and is wasted. Following the introductory lines is a description of the effect of the sun at noon (already cited in 11.7-17) and the last section of the poem presents the fishermen at dusk returning home from their labours (11.46-54). The scorching sun and the morning to dusk routine of each day make one twenty-four hour span much like another; consequently, life seems to be caught up in a futile timeless cycle, divorced from variety and purpose.

Such a realistic portrayal of life in Mexico would indicate that Birney is aware of the less glamorous aspects of man's life in foreign lands. In other words, his awareness is not that of the tourist who sees only the exotic nature of the countries that he

visits. One poem in particular, entitled "Sinaloa", shows the reaction of a local native to the naïvete of a tourist:

> Si, señor, is halligators here, your guidebook say it,
> si, jaguar in the montanas, maybe helephants, quien sabe?
> You like, those palm trees in the sunset? Certament very nice,
> it happen each night in the guide tourista.
> But who the hell eat jaguar, halligator, you heat them?
> Mira my fren, wat this town need is muy big breakwater--
> I like take hax to them jeezly palmas.[5]

The vigor and humor of the poem is sustained throughout by the broken English-cum-Spanish of the native. The poem consists of five stanzas, each of which continues in the same vein as the first; what is beautiful and novel to one man is a source of poverty to the other:

> Hokay, you like bougambilla, ow you say, flower-hung cliffs?
> Is how old, the Fort? Is Colhuan, muy viejo, before Moses, no?
> Is for you, senor, take em away, send us helevator for weat.
> (11.15-17)

The speaker wants bulldozers not machetes, drains not picturesque swamps, tractors rather than oxcarts, and the music of refrigerator trucks in place of that of the birds. Each of the stanzas concludes with a particularly forceful outburst against the more "beautiful" aspects of his country; a sampling shows the following:

> and shoot all them anaquista egrets.
> (1.14)

> and bugger the pink flamingos.
> (1.21)

> and chingar those cute little burrows.
> (1.28)

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[5] Birney, "Sinaloa", Ice Cod Bell or Stone, p.42, 11. 1-7.

In the final lines the tourist is given a further candid opinion of the impression of the country that his manual, the tourist guide book, gives:

> Sin argumento, my fren, is a beautiful music,
> all them birds. Pero, wy you no like to hear combos,
> refrigerator trucks ? Is wonderful on straight new ighway,
> jampack with melons, peppers, bananas, tomatoes, si, si,...
> Chirrimoyas" Mangos" You like! Is for Indios, solamente,
> is bruise, no can ship, is no bueno, believe me, senor--
> and defecar on those goddam guidebook.
> (11.29-35)

In addition to the colloquial, Spanish-flavoured diction and the humor of the poem, two other aspects of it are worthy of note. The poem has much in common with the dramatic monologue; throughout all five stanzas of the poem, the remarks of the local speaker are made in response to questions and comments by the tourist, although we must infer the foreigner's half of the conversation. By means of the monologue we come to appreciate the life and character of one who must exist amidst the dubious beauties of a materially poor area. A second technique the poem employs is that of deflation: the Mexican agrees only to disagree (see 11.1-5; 15-17; 29-31). This helps to convey the tourist's half of the conversation, but it is also a source of humor in the poem as the spontaneity and vigor of the derogatory remarks derive from the quickness of the retorts that are made.

From both "State of Sonora" and "Sinaloa" it is evident that the poet is aware of the harsh realities of life among the poorer

people of Mexico. That they are also the beneficiaries of a rich historical and cultural heritage is an aspect of their civilization that cannot be overlooked. Much of what they have been bequeathed, however, has been prostituted and put to material use; the first section of "Conducted Ritual: San Juan de Ulua" reads:

> Wholehearted Aztecs used this isle
> for carving out the cores of virgins.
> Cortes, more histrionic, purified it
> with a fort and modernized the Indians
> in dungeons contrived to flood each time
> the tide was high. Later the pirates,
> internationally impartial, fired it,
> baking both sides, and later yet
> both Mexicans and Yanquis had a turn
> (killed by shells in eighteen-forty seven:
> soldiers ninety, civilians two-eleven.)[6]

The killings of the past partake of the nature of a ritual; the Aztecs, Cortes, pirates, Mexicans, and Americans have all contributed to the bloody history of the island. In the second part of the poem, the sacrifices are continued as the tourists and their guides defile the ground which has seen the shedding of so much blood:

> And still it lies an isle of sacrifice.
> Eyes conquistadorial and burning
> above their Aztec noses, acolytes
> with skullandcrossbone armbands from
> the Officina de Tourista
> suffer the willing files to come
> before the neverfailing mysteries,
> and hold the virgin hearts aloft
> where bled to death lies history.
> (11.12-20)

Seen from the point of view of the poet, the material poverty of the

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[6] Birney, "Conducted Ritual: San Juan de Ulua", Ice Cod Bell or Stone, p.53, 11.1-11 .

land and the consequent degradation of men are to be deplored. Equally to be detested, however, is the sacrifice of local history and tradition in the name of progress, modernization, or material advancement, as shown, for example, in the poem "Ajijic".

> This hip gringo cant wait to tell you
> it rhymes with tee-HEE. He'll
> have another tequila,
> muchas gracias,make it añejo;
>
> From under the bar he lugs out to be seen
> his six feet of representational nonart.
> It's already sold, to the patron, who has a heart
> of sorts, also his brushes, camera, and IOUs.[7]

The poem continues with an even more explicit statement of the inroads of a foreign culture:

> Outside the fishermen will pass
> and the blobs of pescada blanca in the nets
> swaying over their shoulders will flake
> their bare flanks with mica as they trudge
> from the retreating but as yet
> purely Mexican lake.
> (11.21-26)

This hatred of the prostitution of native history and culture is one of the more salient aspects of Birney's humanism as it is reflected in these later poems. In a poem entitled "Irapuato", the poet continues the bloody history of Mexico mentioned above in connection with "Conducted Ritual:"; he writes:

> this is a favourite nook for
> massacre
> Toltex by Mixtex Mixtex by Aztex
> Aztex by Spanishtex Spanishtex by

[7] Birney, "Ajijic", Ice Cod Bell or Stone,p.44, 11.1-4; 10-13.

Mexitex by Mexitex by Mexitex by Texaco

So any farmer can see how the strawberries
are the biggest and reddest
in the whole damn continent

but why
when arranged under
the market flies

do they look like small clotting hearts?[8]

Implied throughout the bulk of these poems is the inherent value of the past, especially a past that has been steeped in human blood and tradition:

From the stone music of their past the only isthmus,
from astronomic shrines fantastic as iguanas,
to this unlikely world (3 bil.) that waits its earthquake,
is their long matriarchal ritual of women
whose eyes from fires more stubborn than under hotsprings
flash out a thousand Mayan years before a Diaz.[9]

Culture and tradition can be altered for the better, however, even though the change is not continued for very long. In the area of the arts, for example, Francisco Tresguerras attempted to introduce "neo-classical form into the churches of his town, in opposition to the elaborate rococo style prevailing before (and after)".[10]

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[8] Birney, "Irapuato", Ice Cod Bell or Stone, p.46, 11.4-15

[9] Birney, "Sestina for Tehauntepec", Ice Cod Bell or Stone, p.54, 11.19-24.

[10] Birney, author's note to "Francisco Tresguerras", Ice Cod Bell or Stone, p.51.

What is said in the poem itself is applicable generally to the deformation of worthwhile traditions and aspects of history that, in the poet's view, should be preserved:

> They have hung up once more
> all the clutter you banished;
> misshapen pieties
> pockmark the sheerness;
> mock-blood of a god
> drips from your dome.[11]

In a particularly fine poem, "Pachucan Miners", there is an interesting blending of two widely separated cultures. Here the poet applies the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to Mexican silver miners. The poem's beginning evokes an aura of sacredness and ritual:

> All day in a night of lurch, blast,
> bend, they have deepened the dark search
> their precortesian priests began
> into the cold peak's argent
> mysteries.[12]

The diction employed-"dark search", "precortesian priests", and "mysteries" - suggests an historical continuity with the ritual of the past in that the activity of the miners parallels the rites of their ancestors. Continuing the comparison is the remainder of the first section of the poem in which the ore is brought to the surface and

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[11] Birney, "Francisco Tresguerras", p.50, 11.22-27

[12] Birney, "Pachucan Miners", Ice Cod Bell or Stone, p.47, 11.1-5.

taken "to sorceries beyond their vision" (1.8); when the workers themselves ascend at night, they are "orphic and helmeted as divers" (1.11). By the light of the stars, the miners ritually wash themselves of the accrued dirt of their labours and turn homeward:

> Under thin stars by murky troughs
> white-eyed they spit, wash rockscurf off,
> turn without rancour from the guarded gate
> below the white Olympus of the gringos.
> (11.13-16)

> Yet like a defeated army still
> descend past blackened walls above
> the tree-abandoned valley till
> at the lowest street the doors of light
>
> peal out, tequila is a brightness
> in the throat, bottles and faces gleam,
> receive them in a sensible dream.
> (11.21-27)

Freed from their hard work, the men find relaxation in the cantina, though the "sensible dream" is only a temporary interruption of their daily ritual in the silver mines; they must soon return to the underworld in which they spend a large part of their lives:

> then step their own way down to where
> deep in her torchy den,
> snakes Toltecan looping in her ears,
> her crucifix agleam above the sheets,
> Eurydice reclines and hears
> the wild guitars, and daily waits
> the nightly rescue of her silver men.
> (pp.47-48, 11.32-38)

In these final lines the use of ritual and myth reaches its culmination in the image of a Toltecan Eurydice awaiting the return

of her lovers. It is interesting to note that in addition to the use of both Greek and Mexican history, the crucifix of Christianity is introduced. These different cultural and historical elements work together to create an impression of remoteness; the men seem cut off from the realities of the present and belong to the timeless world of ritual and myth. The silver miners are almost non-human as they work and descend from the mountain. It is only during the brief period at the cantina that they assume the features of men:

> In the cantinas helmets roll,
> backs fling upright, O now legs are male,
> are braced, each knotty pair, to hold
> up song and hurl it at the night.
> (11.28-31)

Previously they had been without "rancour", "wordless", and "like a defeated army". There is no escape from this world, for it is only in the world of Eurydice that they are able to work and to continue their existence. Paradoxically they must undergo the dehumanization of their affair with her - their work demands it - if they are to continue to survive as men. The "Pachucan Miners" are part of the mosaic of humanity, albeit a suffering one, with which Birney the humanist is concerned. Their work is difficult and, like the men in "State of Sonora", they provide us with a glimpse of life in Mexico today.

In the volume entitled Near False Creek Mouth, Birney employs a geographical organization to present his concern for men.

The initial poem, "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth", has its setting in Vancouver, but as the poet states, "its theme is our precarious universe".[13] The poems that follow it manifest in varying degrees the precariousness of man's life in today's world; they appear under the following headings: "Caribbean Turnabout", "Farthest Neighbours", "Beyond False Creek Mouth", and "Near False Creek Mouth". Interspersed throughout the volume are four maps, each of which shows the geographical location of the poems that follow in relationship to False Creek itself. It is interesting to note that the last map appears under the heading of "Near False Creek Mouth", but it includes, in a less detailed fashion, all of the other maps. The effect obtained is a visual illustration of the closeness of men everywhere; as the poet himself wrote in a passage cited earlier: "they are all close to us now, not only in time space, but in the sharing of needs and hopes--and premonitions of disaster."[14]

In the first poem, "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth", the poet views various scenes as he walks along the beach near his home. These scenes give rise to thoughts of the troubled world and the men and women who inhabit it. The highly personal

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[13] Birney, author's note, Near False Creek Mouth.

[14] Ibid.

text of his encounters is briefly interrupted by shorter sections that place the poet and what he sees - the world of man - in a cosmic perspective. The poem begins with one of these briefer sections:

> The time is the last of warmth
> and the fading of brightness
> before the final flash and the night[15]

Immediately the poem stresses the time factor indicated in the title. The season is late autumn and eventually we learn too that the approximate time of the poem is before and during sunset. When the narrator does speak, it is of men in the autumn of their humanity:

> I walk as the earth turns
> from its burning father
> here on the lowest edge of mortal city
> where windows flare on faded flats
> and the barren end of the ancient English
> who tippled mead in Alfred's hall
> and took tiffin in lost Lahore
> drink now their fouroclock chainstore tea
> sighing like old pines as the wind turns
> (11.4-12)

The "barren end of the ancient English" is reenforced with:

> The theme lies in the layers
> made and unmade by the nudging lurching
> spiralling down from nothing
>
> down through the common explosion of time
> through the chaos of suns
> to the high seas of the spinning air
> where the shelves form and re-form down
> through cirrus to clouds on cracking peaks
> to the terraced woods and the shapeless town
> and its dying shapers
> (p.3, 11.33-42)

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[15] Birney, "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth", Near False Creek Mouth, p.2, 11.1-3. (Poem # 1)

Here, as in much of Birney's earlier poetry, that which is associated with the city is sterile and valueless. Lines 33-35 present a rather nebulous statement of the theme; the poem appears to be organized on a visual scale of cosmic proportions, descending from the timeless reaches of space to the air above the earth, the world of man himself, and the sea. The sea in turn is presented as an ocean of air,dark and unfathomable. The nothingness of space is parallelled by the nothingness of the lives of so many of the earth's inhabitants.

After describing some of the visitors to the beach, the poet writes:

> I pass
>
> dreaming my own unravelled plots
> between eating water and eaten shore
> in this hour of the tired and homing
> retired dissolving
> in the days of the separate wait
> for the mass dying
> (p.4, 11.84-90)

Nothingness, in human terms, is defined as loneliness--men isolated from one another, possessing only their expectation of death. As a man, the poet feels this loneliness:

> and I having clambered down to the last
> shelf of the gasping world of lungs
> do not know why I too wait and stare
> before descending the final step
> into the clouds of the sea
> (p.5, 11.91-95)

Man is seen as living between the timelessness of space and the near-immortality of the ocean:

> The beat beating is the soft cheek
> nudging of the sly shoving almost
> immortal ocean at work
> on the earth's liquidation
> (11.96-99)

To the imagination of the poet, the world will end in a flash of light, to be followed by darkness; this has already been stated in the opening lines of the poem. At one stage, the sun, sea, and humanity are fused in an image that captures the picture of man as waiting for the end:

> Outward the sun explodes light
> like the brief rehearsal of light to come
> over the vitreous waters
> At this edge of the blast
> a young girl sits on a granite bench
> so still as if already only
> silhouette burned in the stone
> (11.100-106)

In order to underline this image there follows the text of a rather dull conversation between two women gossiping and a vivid picture of the

> freakish forms
> of tugs all bows and swollen funnels
> straining to harbour in False Creek
> and blindly followed by mute scows
> with islets of gravel to thicken the city
> and square bowls of saffron sawdust
> the ground meal of the manstruck forest
> or towing shining grids of the trees stricken
> (11.117-124)

The reference to the tugs and the sea effects an easy transition

to a description of life in the ocean. Here the physical movement is one of ascent whereas formerly it was one of descent:

> The beat is the slap slip nudging
> as the ledges are made unmade
> by the lurching swaying of all the world
> that lies under the spinning air
>
> from the dead centre and the fiery circles
> up through the ooze to black liquidities
> up to the vast moats
> where the doomed whales are swimming
> by the weedy walls of sunless Carcassonnes
> rising rising to the great eels waiting
> in salt embrasures and swirling up
> to the twilit roofs that floor the Gulf
> up to the crab-scratched sands
> of the dappled Banks
>
> into the sunblazed living mud
> and the radiant mussels
> that armour the rocks
> (p.6, 11.132-148)

Just as the movement of space and air had descended upon the world of man, so, too, the beat of the ocean - the product of unfathomable depths - converges upon him. But man must remain in the barren world he has created, a world

> where carhorns call
> call in the clotting air by a shore
> where shamans never again will sound
> with moon-snail conch the ritual plea
> to brother salmon or vanished seal
> and none ever heard
> the horn of Triton or merman
> (11.152-158)

As night falls, the beat quickens and a sense of urgency prevails; the poet, having described the distasteful refuse of man's

labour, feels the need to return once more to the seawall, to be as close as he can to the sea:

> as I too turn with the need to feel
> once more the yielding of moist sand
> and thread the rocks back to the seawall
> shadowed and empty now
> of booklost ladies or flickering wrens
> (p.8, 11.204-208)

He continues from the seawall along the shore, describing an old Swede eyeing some girls, and sea crashing into the shore, and the wreck of an old boat

> longdrowned
> on an Ararat of broken clamshells
> and the flaking of dead crabs
> (p.9, 11.222-224)

The sight of beachlogs gives rise to

> heigh ho the logs that no one wants
> and the men that sit on the logs
> that no one wants
> (11.229-231)

Finally he can go no farther and turns away from the shore's edge and must face "the human encrusted reefs" (p.10, 1.258) and "the world of the dry troubling" (p.9, 1.247). His thoughts revert once more to the endless reaches of space and the conclusion of the poem echoes the beginning:

> But still on the highest shelf of ever
> washed by the curve of timeless returnings
> lies the unreached unreachable nothing
> whose winds wash down to the human shores
> and slip shoving
>
> into each thought nudging by footsteps now
> as I turn to my brief night's ledge

in the last of warmth
and the fading of brightness
on the sliding edge of the beating sea
(p.10, 11.269-278)

"November Walk Near False Creek Mouth", like an earlier poem, "Dusk on English Bay", used the immediate scene before the poet to effect a transcendent vision of man. The difference between the two poems lies in the scope of the vision; "Dusk" utilized a peaceful scene to attain a picture of men and war whereas "November Walk" uses a less than flattering picture of man and the world he has created to achieve a prospect of the cosmos and the place of man in the universe. It would be unwise to attempt too definite a statement of the theme of a poem such as "November Walk", for the poet at one point speaks of what he writes as follows:

lone as my half-thoughts
wheeling too with persistence of hunger
or floating on scraps of flotsam
(p.7, 11.180-183)

In the half-thoughts we are given a picture of man confronted with the vastness of space and ocean; he has created nothingness in his own life and now must live with the consequent loneliness. Always his life is swept over by the winds that spiral down from the emptiness of space and his "darkening bitten shore" (p.10, 1.255) is eroded continually by the depths of the ocean.

The vastness of the scale of "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth" acts as a preparation for the framework of the poems in the

rest of the volume. Always the geographic focal point is False Creek; no matter where the locale of any one poem, the concerns of the people involved are close to us all, insofar as we share their "needs and hopes--and premonitions of disaster."[16]

In a poem entitled "Transistor", the poet describes the actions of an old negro woman in Jamaica as she sweeps a seldom-used guest-house for the visitors. These include the poet, an engineer, and two young lovers. The woman has a rich heritage that intrigues the poet:

> But the old woman was belting songs out
> as if she had to send them all the way
> back to the sea and the canebrakes
> her greatgrandfather ran from
> the night he brought her words
> stored in his rebellious head
> beyond the howl of the slavers' hounds
> to this remotest hilltop in Jamaica [17]

The young negro couple, listening to a transistor radio, are a completely different breed from the housekeeper, who has never seen a transistor. The world of the poet and the world of the new generation of negroes is the same; but though the latter pay no attention to the old lady and retire to the porch, the poet continues to hear in her singing the history and cultural depth of her race:

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[16] Birney, author's note

[17] Birney, "Transistor", Near False Creek Mouth, p.12, ll. 19-26. (Poem # 2)

as her mind unravelled to airs
a grandmother might have woven
stooping in dappled coffee groves
when this was a plantation house
buzzing with brief whiteman's prospering
(p.13, 11.48-52)

---

as if her voice were immortal and separate
within her and she only the toughened reed
vibrated still by the singing dead
by the slaved and the half-free
The narrow high-ceilinged room was a box
and deaths for fear of Mamba hope of Jesus
the bitter years and the bawdy
(pp.13-14, 11.57-64)

Her song ended, the negress toasts the health of the men of the poet's nation and leaves. It is only now that the poet becomes aware of the sound of the transistor; the radio station is playing a cowboy song "from last year's Parade" (p.14, 1.88). The young couple on the porch have been listening:

I suppose they'd been listening to him
as exclusively as I to her
and out of just as much need
to exchange our pasts
(p.15, 11.91-94)

"Transistor", the first poem from the section entitled 'Caribbean Turnabout', is of interest because it presents an attitude that is of special importance in this last volume of poems. The background of the local people, despite their lack of material progress, is valued because it represents something that is missing in the poet's heritage. Seen in its simplest terms, it is possible that the poet's interest in the past of the housekeeper could be the result of a tourist's curiosity for what is novel or unknown. Beyond this, however,

for the poet the songs of the old woman revive the past in a fashion that the songs of the cowboy cannot do. She is a living transistor, both the product and conveyor of her past.

The poet is aware of the fact that he is alien to the culture of the people of the islands, but he is appreciative of any acceptance that he finds:

> Always now
> I move grateful
> to all of you
> who let me walk thoughtless
> and unchallenged
> in the gardens
> in the castles
> of your skins[18]

In a similar vein, he writes of the island of Jamaica itself:

> The other velvetskinned
> graceful as a dark gladiolus
> served saltfish and akee to us three:
>
> two pink young Montreal boyfriends
> one greywhite Vancouver me
>
> The cod was from Newfoundland they said
> The new found land is here I said[19]

Certain parts of these foreign lands, however, contain much that is odious to the poet. In a poem entitled "Caracas", he describes some of the ills concomitant with newly found material prosperity:

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[18] Birney, "For George Lamming", Near False Creek Mouth, p.16, 11.24-31. (Poem #3)

[19] Birney, "Saltfish and akee", Near False Creek Mouth, p.17, 11.17-23. (Poem #4)

> Pumped up from the immigrant ships
> by the great nose of the American-aid Hiway
> labourers from marginal bogs in Galicia
> lengthen the 9-mile ooze of slums
> (2 walls of packingbox 2 of air
> ½ a scraptin roof)
> from which fountain 89 skyscrapers[20]

The National Pantheon, containing the bones of Bolivar, is "drowned in the cement foam"(1.8), and the declaration of independence is "encrusted in a bronze urn"(1.14). Modernization is presented in imagery that relates to water and the ocean. Unlike much water, however, this type does not vivify, but encrusts and drowns. The "1000 Cadillacs" (1.11), symbolic of avarice, are described as sharks attracted by the scent of money:

> They swim upwards then through the shoals
> of Galicians and the rest of the 7 000 000 lesser organisims
> toward the bright bloodsmell of
> $$$$$
> lapping hotels like beached liners
> on the airwashed atolls
> of America's Venezuela
> (11.15-21)

Here, as in some of the poems of Mexico in Ice Cod Bell or Stone, progress is viewed as destroying the native beauty and culture of the country concerned—in this istance, Venezuela. By using such language as "pumped up", "great hose", "marginal bogs", "ooze of slums", the poet sustains the meataphor of the country as an island or atoll deluged with wealth and lucre. The poem is a non-didactic indictment of modern civilization, in that the materialism of America is representative of the ills of Western Society. In another poem, "Guadelupe", the poet sees, even in the people who benefit from the prosperity, a richness of past, a mentality, that is beyond his grasp:

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[20] Birney,"Caracas", Near False Creek Mouth, p.23, 11.1-7.(Poem #9)

Ah señoritas
with permanent seats
in the bullring
and escorts who know headwaiters
in Paris
it's not till you park
your Alfa Romeros
a quartermile from the shrine and
coifed in black lace from Aragon
crawl on your silken penitential knees
over the cobbles
that I see you have Mexican blood
running with sins and anesthesias
richer than any my veins will ever carry [21]

The satiric tone of the treatment of the status symbols of the ladies cannot be overlooked; but, beyond this, the last three lines of the poem remind one of the old lady in "Transistor", even tough the characters of the two poems are at opposite ends of the social spectrum. Both the señoritas and the cleaning lady are heirs to pasts that the poet can appreciate but never possess. His appreciation even extends to the sins of the señoritas and their ability to repent in the way that they do.

It is evident, from such poems as "Transistor" on the one hand and "Caracas" on the other, that the poet views the people of the countries that he visits in two different ways. They are seen as having a culture and past that are to be envied but, at the same time, they are tainted by the materialism that infects his own society. In the poem "Cartagena de Indias" the more squalid aspects of the struggle to survive are presented, but the resultant

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[21] Birney, "Guadelupe", Near False Creek Mouth,p.39.(Poem #17)

impression left with the poet is considerably different from that of "Caracas". The poem begins with a quotation from Heredia that states the former greatness of Cartagena:

> Ciudad triste, ayer reina de la mar[22]

Today, the queen of the sea has become only a shadow of her former self. Cartagena is presented as it now is by the poet who, as tourist, is an alien among the local inhabitants:

> Each fact its own phantom
> its own formula of breed and shade
> but all the eyes accuse me back and say
>
> There are only two races here:
>
> we human citizens
> who are poor but have things to sell
> and you from outer space
> unseasonable our one tourist
> but plainly able to buy [23]

Immediately, the dichotomy is set up between the foreigner and the locals; seeing the squalor around him, the poet contrasts the past with the present:

> This arthritic street
> where Drake's men and Cole's ran
> swung cutlasses where wine and sweet blood
> snaked in the cobbles' joints
> leaps now in a sennet of taxi horns
> to betray my invasion
> All watch my first retreat
> to barbizans patched from Morgan's grapesnot
> and they rush me
> three desperate tarantula youths
> waving Old Golds unexcised
> (11.10-20)

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[22] José Maria de Heredia, inscription translated by Birney, prefatory to "Cartagena de Indias", Near False Creek Mouth, p.30

[23] Birney, "Cartagena de Indias", Near False Creek Mouth, p.30 11.1-9. (Poem # 13)

The noise of the taxis and the black-market cigarette pedlars are followed by shoeshine boys and "a congo-drum man in jeans" (1.24) selling watches. As the poet continues his walk through the city, he is aware that he is regarded with suspicion:

> I cast a shadow of silence
> blue-dreaded eyes
> corpse face
> hidalgo clothes
> tall one tall as a demon
> pass O pass us quickly
> (p.31, 11.40-45)

The only reason he is tolerated is because of his money; as a wealthy tourist, he has what so many of the inhabitants want. Everything about the poet serves only to separate him from the people:

> It's written in the cut of my glasses
> I've a hotelroom all to myself
> with a fan and a box of Vitamin C
> It can be measured
> in my unnatural stride
> that my life expectation
> is more than forty
> especially now that I'm close to sixty
> (p.32, 11.71-78)

At last, the poet encounters a monument; he comes

> to a pair of shoes
> in a circle of baked mud
> worn out of shape one on its side
> For a second I am shaken by panic
> heat? humidity? something has got me
> the shoes are concrete
> and ten feet long
> (p.33, 11.99-105)

A plaque tells the poet that the momument was erected to the memory of Luis Lopez and his old shoes. He goes to a bookstore and discovers that "<u>los zapatos</u>" (1.111) are the people of Cartagena themselves; the owner further explains the significance of the monument:

See here this sonnet
always he make hard words
Said we were lazy except to make noise
we only shout to get money
ugly too, backward... why not?
It is for a poet to write these things
Also plena--how say it?--
plena de rancio desalino
Full of rancid disarray!
Si si but look, at the end, when old
he come to say one nice thing
only one ever about us
He say we inspire that love a man has
for his shoes--Entonces
we give him a monument to the shoes
(p.34, 11.125-139)

Now the poet sees the people of Cartagena in a different light from that of the initial part of the poem. The volume of poetry by Luis Lopez that he purchases creates the same love in him that the South American poet himself felt:

Discarded queen I thought I love you too
Full of rancid disarray
city like any city
full of the stench of human indignity
and disarray of the human proportion
full of the noisy always poor
and the precocious dying
stinking with fear the stale of ignorance
I love you first for giving birth
to Luis Lopez

Descendents of pirates grandees
galleyslaves and cannibals
I love the whole starved cheating
poetry-reading lot of you
for throwing me the shoes of deadman Luis
to walk me back into brotherhood
(p.34, 11.143-152; p.35, 11.158-163)

This statement of brotherhood is perhaps one of the most moving declarations that Birney as poet and humanist makes. Sharing a common humanity with the inhabitants of Cartagena, he is able to rise above the divisions of tongue, race, and economics. Despite the obvious failings of the inhabitants, they still inspire love; they have accorded an honour to Luis Lopez that the poet's own people do not give him:

> ——and him I envy
> I who am seldom read by my townsmen
> (p.34, 11.156-157)

Perhaps it is because they have managed to retain some interest in that which is not strictly material that the poet comes to share a sense of communality he does not always find among his own people. Nevertheless, the poet's acceptance or lack of acceptance at home, as poet, appears a secondary matter in the context of the poem as a whole. As has already been indicated, the central thought of the poem is the transcending of the divisions described earlier and the attainment of brotherhood. Here, as elsewhere, the interest of the poet lies in the area of human values and human concerns, the elements that divide men and the factors that unite them.

In the section "Farthest Neighbours" appears the poem "Letter to a Cuzco Priest". It continues Birney's interest in the welfare of men. The poem is both a story of injustice and a plea for brotherhood; it is addressed to a young priest whose words have inspired a group

of Incas to protest government injustice. Structurally, the story of their fate is interspersed throughout the format of the letter. The poem begins:

> Father whose name
> your smalltown paper took in vain
>
> Young father whose face
> blurred in the cheap newsprint
>
> I could not recognize in a street
>
> Father who will never know me
> nor read this which is written
> in your honour
> in the terms of my worship[24]

It is appropriate that the opening address of the poem should be couched in terms akin to those of a prayer since the poet dedicates his work to the priest. In line eleven the narrative commences:

> This morning two Incas
> tramped on their horny feet
> down sun-ravaged slopes
> clutching cardboard banners
> Thirty more Indians followed
> sunfaced silent ragged
> (11.11-16)

Protesting the state of their poverty, the shepherds and their flock proceed downhill past the oblivious tourists. The authorities and the vested interests are disturbed and the army is called upon to halt the march. The violence that ensues results in two Indians being killed and twenty wounded and imprisoned. Well-meant words of the priest were written on the posters of the natives:

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[24] Birney, "Letter to a Cuzco Priest", Near False Creek Mouth, p.50, ll. 1-9 (Poem # 21)

"The Government is only an armed front
an armed front for Fifty Families"
(p.52, 11.1-2)

"Let the land feed its people"
(1.4)

Asked both to forgive himself and worship himself for his part in the massacre, the priest is addressed with understanding and the local incident is generalized:

Father · the guilt is not yours
though words that blazed last week
from your pulpit lettered their placards

The two who bore them are dead

Father the guilt begins

In the other pulpits and all the places
where no one will say your words
(p.51, 11.46-52)

Continuing the universalization, the poet sees the priest as a mediator of human forgiveness for all mankind:

Father forgive all men if you must
but only in despite of god
and in Man's name
(p.52, 11.64-66)

Man must become more human, more dependant upon his own will than on God, for it is only in awakening the better qualities of man that injustice can be prevented. The concluding lines of the poem are a further plea, this time more personal than, but just as poignant as the others:

Pray to yourself above all for men like me
that we do not quench
the man
in each of us
(p.53, 11.92-95)

The story of the Incas and the injustice of the state's treatment of them is but a modern variation of an old theme. In the poem "Machu Picchu", the poet speaks of the lost shrine of the Incas and the suffering some of them had to endure at the hands of Pizarro and the Spanish; the Indian natives died rather than reveal the whereabouts of their holy city, whose location was finally discovered by Hiram Bingham in 1911. In the poem there are four visitors to Machu Picchu, of whom the poet is one. Here, as in "Conducted Ritual: San Juan de Ulua" and "Pachucan Miners", Birney manifests a poetic interest in the historic past:

> But the truth is our talk was mainly
> to hide how we felt growing suddenly
> bodily back into legend
> no conquisador hooked even
> his mailed finger into
>
> ---
>
> Today in fact stirred
> by quite nameless excitement
> we have walked in the last dark hour
> groped up stairs grooved and gouged
> in the living rock to stand
> higher than the highest watchtowers
> like Broken spectres magnified
> on the black peak and see the Sun
> rise still on what was meant
> to worship Him[25]

The visitors are in awe because they have come into contact with a moment of glory in man's past. While the city of Machu Picchu and the legend surrounding it are steeped in suffering, the Incas themselves have produced and are the inheritors of a past that is rich in

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[25] Birney, "Machu Picchu", Near False Creek Mouth, p.56, 11.65-69; pp.56-57, 11.80-89. (Poem # 22)

tradition and hallowed by the shedding of human blood; now, for a brief moment, the poet and the other visitors share in that heritage. Soon, however, they must leave and as they descend the sight of two Incan shepherds arouses much the same envious response as the old lady of "Transistor":

> and passing two latterday Incas
> hewers of dung chewers of cocaine
> wandering in some dull symbiosis
> (not one of us could hope for)
> with their silent herds
> (p.57, 11.102-106)

The poem concludes on a note that is both sombre and optimistic, for Machu Picchu, like all things human, is transistory; but until such time as it does pass away,

> Till then
> it is good and beautiful to see you stare
> out of your green humped cumulus
> of mountains and the human mist you
> and Hiram Bingham and the high Incas
> obstinately into your Sun
> (p.58, 11.120-125)

The poems of Ice Cod Bell or Stone, and Near False Creek Mouth, as we have seen, deal with a variety of topics ranging through the spectrum of such general areas as culture, history and society. They show, in varying degrees, Birney's inclination for whatever is associated with men. As with the earlier poems, many of these later ones contain an implicit, and sometimes an explicit, plea for understanding and fellowship- the only real solution to the problems of men in today's world.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In this thesis we have attempted to show a thematic continuity in the poetry of Earle Birney. The poems have been treated, for the most part, in chronological order because the temporal arrangement permits an ease of handling that might not otherwise be attained. Not all of Birney's poems have been included in the discussion for the number of poems precludes an analysis of each one. In the last section of Chapter Four, for example, the emphasis has been placed upon the poem from which the volume Near False Creek Mouth receives its name and upon the sections "Caribbean Turnabout" and "Farthest Neighbours".

The interest in people of foreign lands displayed by the later volumes of poetry is but a continuation of Birney's humanism in the earlier poems and in Trial of a City. Many of the earlier poems treat of men in a state of great crisis, men at war, and men living with a precarious peace. In the drama Trial of a City, Vancouver becomes the scapegoat for the ills of modern man and his civilization. The past, in the personages of the witnesses, has no power to redeem the present or alter the future. Only by willing to live each day better can man determine that tomorrow will be good. The poems published before Trial underscore the ability of man to create a better world and the new genre summarizes all that Birney has said about the human condition to that point. Ice Cod Bell or Stone and Near False Creek Mouth, to a great extent, look at men of foreign lands in the light of their own unique historical backgrounds. Birney admires and envies the tradition that

they possess, yet does not view the differences between his own heritage and theirs as insurmountable obstacles to brotherhood.

One of the points that has been made regarding Birney's technique is his inclination to experiment with language; in addition, he uses many verse forms and genres. From both of these his poetry receives a certain vigor and forcefulness that it might not possess had he limited his techniques and modes of expression. In keeping with his versatility and constant search for new approaches, Birney has revised many of the poems here discussed. A number of these appear in his Selected Poems, published in 1966. The writer of this thesis has preferred to leave a consideration of the revisions to students of bibliography and textual criticism; what has been said regarding man's will, the precariousness of the human condition, love and brotherhood, is not altered by the poems in their revised form. The continuity of the poet's humanism is sustained, though the literary merits of one version of a poem as opposed to another may well be debated.

Humanism, as here treated, does not exhaust the possibilities for further consideration of Earle Birney and his works. No mention has been made of his criticism of his novels. Of the latter he has written only two: Turvey and Down the Long Table; his criticism has not been collected and is, therefore, limited to articles in various

books and periodicals. The one exception is his The Creative Writer, originally a series of C.B.C. broadcasts and later published by that same corporation. Certainly any assessment of Birney's position in the field of Canadian letters would of necessity include his poetry, criticism, and novels. Such an ambition, however, has not been within the scope of this thesis. The poetry itself provides ample material for analysis and discussion and indeed, may continue to do so, for the well-springs of Birney's poetry do not appear to be drying up as he becomes older.[1] While it is perhaps true that no single poem surpasses "David", the poems of Ice Cod Bell or Stone and Near False Creek Mouth are of a more even quality than those of the earlier volumes.

The poems which have been chosen for discussion in this thesis are representative of the poet's work as a whole. Selection may at times seem arbitrary, as the theme of humanism is present in many poems of Birney not treated here. Consideration of these other poems, however, would have resulted in needless repetition and added little to what has been said. We conclude this study with the words of the poet himself who writes of his poetry:

> I prefer to believe...that my poems are
> the best proof I can print of my humanness,
> signals out of the loneliness into which
> all of us are born and in which we die,
> affirmations of kinship with the other
> wayfarers, and above all with you, my Not
> Impossible Reader, who will go on from
> here.[2]

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[1] Witness the presence of the "concrete" poems "Lines" and "Walls" in Prism International, VI, No.3(Spring,1967),42-43. Such works testify to the poet's continuing interest in the forms of poetry.

[2] Earle Birney,"Preface", Selected Poems:1940-1966 (Toronto,1966),p.xii.

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