IRONIC SURVIVAL

IN THE POETRY OF EARLE BIRNEY

by

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ABSTRACT

From Earle Birney's first books of poetry in the nineteen-forties to the most recent in the sixties and seventies, his most basic continuing concern has been the relation between man and nature. This one overriding theme may be seen to underlie the majority of the individual poems, and it is developed in most effective detail in the major poems, which I have chosen for study: "David" (1941), *Trial of a City* (1952), "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth" (1963), and "what's so big about GREEN?" (1973). The theme has grown in complexity with the deepening of the poet's understanding; and from the beginning he has found in ironic technique the means with which to resolve the interpenetrating duality.

The conflict, as Birney sees it, is older than man; it is the struggle of life for survival. That struggle is ironically conceived, in that it seems immediately necessary while ultimately useless. To make the situation worse, and more ironic, man throughout history has continually oppressed and destroyed his own kind as well as the nature that sustains him, using the same technology and intellect that has brought him to the pinnacle of biological and cultural success. It is the responsibility of the poet who realizes

the full dimensions of this complex paradox to sympathize with both nature and her human inhabitants.

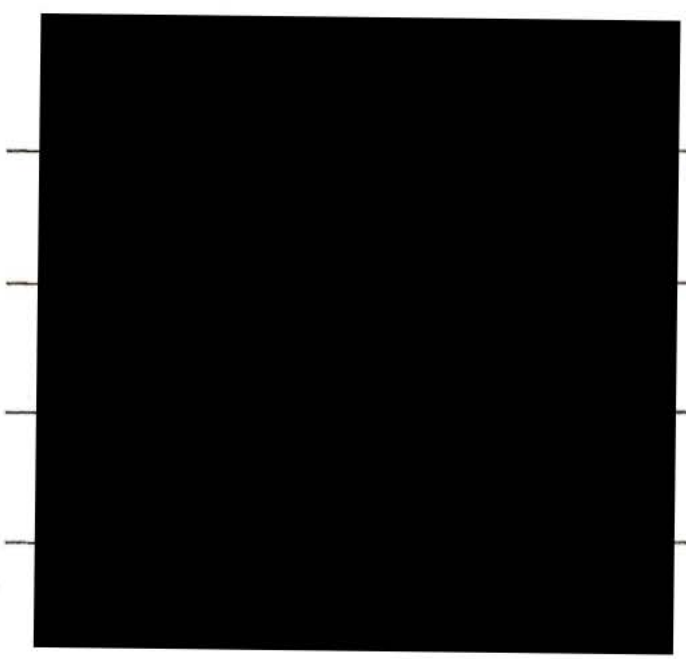
What Birney accomplishes, however, is even more difficult, and finally more fulfilling than a mere compromise. His method is to present both sides of the argument of man for survival, and through aesthetic balance, to transcend the limits of a biased judgment. The poet describes each side in such revealing detail, to the point of caricature, that he is able to slip away, unconfined by either position. Birney ultimately deserts both sides (that of man and that of nature, most simply) in order to enjoy an uncompromising freedom in detachment from the unending struggle. His poems reach a kind of secular spiritualism, which places highest faith in the integrity of the creative consciousness. Birney's increasing emphasis on ironic form finally becomes more than a successful means of discussing survival; it becomes a means of achieving it, at least in the world of the psyche.

As the roots of Birney's growth may be found in his pre-poetic career, the Introduction is concerned with the biographical background and its relevance to the poetry. The main body of the thesis will not attempt to deal with all of the poems involving irony and survival; these aspects are included in the more general studies of a larger number of poems in Peter C. Noel-Bentley's M.A. Thesis (1966) and in the established work of Richard Robillard (1971) and

Frank Davey (1971). Instead, I hope to focus the main current of Birney's development around the major title-poem of each of his four decades of work. Each poem demands a presentation and resolution of a theme that takes on ever-expanding implications. With a detailed analysis of the ironic method in each of these longer poems, the full extent of Birney's resources may be better appreciated. In addition, I think that a brief explanation of Birney's Concrete experiments will help to highlight the extent of his ironic detachment in terms of both theme and form.

Birney's total and even infinite application of irony to nature and man, to poetry and poet, presents a view which is not only penetratingly accurate but helpful in one's adaptation to the world. What Birney traces is a path to survival in its most complete sense.

Examiners:



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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:

IRONIC SURVIVAL: LITERATURE, COMMITMENT, AND CHANGE

In studying the development of Birney's poetry, it is helpful to consider his personal background, especially as his first volume, *David and Other Poems*, was published in 1942 when he was already thirty-eight years old. The poetry mirrors the critical change which marked Birney's earlier life and career. The movement in both cases is from a preoccupation with the physical world, action, and social values to a concern with poetry as a language art, and its role in the assertion of the inner man.

Birney was born in 1904 and grew up in Calgary, Banff, and the southern Kootenays. The economic background at home was both rural and "proletarian." He relates,

> "My parents were largely self-educated; my mother came from generations of Shetland fisherfolk and crofters; an immigrant girl, she was working as a waitress in a miner's hotel in the Kootenays when she married my father, who was the son of a small-town butcher. My father was by turns a cow-puncher, brakeman, prospector, paper-hanger, soldier, and unsuccessful bush-farmer."[1]

By contrast, Birney's own youth was spent between school and work. The work experience itself was spent in intimate, physically demanding contact with the outdoor environment. He continues,

> "I was doing heavy farm work with horses before I was twelve; at sixteen, axeman; seventeen, swinging picks and sledgehammers on winter relief; eighteen, oiling swamps with a forty-pound barrel pump on my back. Eventually I paid my college fees from such work and from earned scholarships."[2]

Such first-hand experience provided objective substance for the poems of the first book. Undoubtedly Birney absorbed an intimate feeling for Canadian nature while growing up in this way, so that his poetic descriptions are unusually vivid. Both Margaret Atwood and Northrop Frye have drawn substantial examples from Birney's verse in characterizing the environment in Canadian literature as indifferently hostile.[3] The direct exposure to nature in a relatively primitive condition of survival must have impressed Birney with an essential irony: that man must simultaneously depend upon and exploit nature.

As the future poet became further involved with academic work, the distance from the physical world widened. Birney found himself more and more a member of the intellectual class rather than the working class. But in the thirties, class mattered less than it seemed as nearly everyone faced an immediate problem of physical survival. The irony in this case stemmed from the fact of securing a basic livelihood from the more abstract channels of academia. Birney has been accused of an intellectual contradiction as he came to embrace the socialist rhetoric of the working classes.[4] Yet his roots were there; and while he became a Trotskyist, he cannot really be faulted for making a living with the

help of his mental talents.

Frank Davey describes a swift conversion to Marxism upon Birney's reading the *Communist Manifesto*.[5] Soon afterwards, he had narrowed his new view to the position of the Trotskyist camp.[6] And within two years, Birney was immersed in political activity. Davey relates, "In 1934 and 1935, he was a Trotskyist functionary in England, at work reconciling various factions of the party and organizing a party cell within the Independent Labour Party."[7] He even interviewed Trotsky himself in Norway and in November of 1935 published an ILP pamphlet recording the talk, under the pseudonym "E. Robertson," entitled *Conversations with Trotsky*.[8]

Back in London, Birney found time in the British Museum to complete his dissertation, "Chaucer's Irony."[9] Though it is not established for certain that Trotsky's influential *Literature and Revolution* had been read at this time, the finished study reads very much as a Trotskyist critique of Chaucer's aloof stance as a class-bound courtier. Trotsky superimposes upon the individual's artistic needs a concern for the cultural needs of a society at large: "even [though] a successful solution of the elementary problems of food, clothing, shelter, and even of literacy, would in no way signify a complete victory of the new historic principle, that is, of Socialism. . . . Culture feeds on the sap of economics."[10] Birney agrees, and narrows his critical gaze on the figure of Chaucer, in the light of

> "the concept that history, or at least the history of great art, is basically affected by such 'common or garden' things as the way by which the artist secured food, clothing and shelter for himself" (*CI*.V.22). He began by defining irony as "unavoidably satiric, subtle, moral, mimic, and snobbish, . . ." as "appealing primarily to bourgeois appraisers of literature, to those who believe or encourage the myth of the lone artist's 'impartiality', and glorify the presentation of the individual opposed to the masses" (*CI*.I.42-43).[11]

Apparently Birney is using Chaucer to exercise his own dual internal needs for literary appreciation and social criticism. His method follows Trotsky's advice:

> One of the most important tasks of criticism is to analyze the individuality of the artist (that is, his art) into its component elements, and to show their correlations . . . by the social conditions of education, of existence, of work, and of associations. The social conditions in historic human society are first of all, the conditions of class affiliation.[12]

In Chaucer, then, irony is seen by Birney as a product of "'class doctrines, of the gentlemanly traditions which expect the artist to remain "above" the struggles of his day' (*CI*.I.45)."[13] But what is more deserving of Birney's attack, as he sees it, is Chaucer's exploitive use of "'irony as . . . a mode of escape from, or at least of compromise with, the fundamental problems which confront the thinker in the life of his day ' (*CI*.IV.12)."[14] However, Birney was forced at the same time to respect the advantage of such artistic duplicity.

While irony represents a form of escape in both a personal and poetic sense, the perspective it provides may be put tc constructive use. Its initial approach to thematic material is less direct than the more specific attacks of

satire. But its ultimate motivation is positive. Birney distinguishes between the two methods: "Satire itself is an emphasis upon *contrasts and contradictions;* irony pretends to conceal that emphasis."[15] But although the techniques differ in degree of subtlety, the basic function of the ironic mode in general is common to both. Birney anticipates the social and human mission of irony when he writes of "the ultimate service it performs of *emphasizing the disparity between what might be and what is.*"[16] It is in this respect that his poems may be seen as contributing to a more enlightened survival. Their unified tonal composition becomes a new pattern of growth ("what might be") for a society of men ("what is") so obviously in need of spiritual rejuvenation.

As a columnist and reviewer for the *Canadian Forum* from 1936 to 1939, Birney found an effective mixture of factual material and satirical flavor to express a commitment to socialist ideals. Davey recognizes only the partisan content of Birney's journalism, in claiming that

> Birney's articles and reviews throughout 1937 and 1938 are uncompromisingly Trotskyist. His subjects are nearly always left wing writers and his complaints about them invariably concern their Stalinist leanings. In addition he writes under the pen-name "Rufus" a highly selective listing of instances of capitalist greed and Stalinist hypocrisy.[17]

But even at this point in his career, Birney was proficient in ironic technique, on his way toward greater artistic autonomy.

As Birney himself was caught between action and art, his thesis granted Chaucer a certain respect in recognizing the need for personal survival: "he was compelled to speak ironically in order that he might at the same time retain his worldly position . . . in the affairs of men, and yet express the fullness of his creative genius."[18] But even more relevant than actual self-preservation, in Birney's case, is the attitude which coincides with such an ambiguous position.

In terms of the poetry itself, Birney learns to hold a certain distance between the surface action of words and events and the creative spirit of the writing. Even when a poem implicates the poet himself in its critical view, there remains a distance at which the reader and deeper poet may stand together and regard those limitations. There they may share an underlying sympathy with a transcendent cultural value which redeems from an aloof stance the dangerous and non-artistic struggles of the world.

The problem of relevant irony produces fruitful solutions in the hands of a master. The demands of truth to the subject and truth to one's own position in the world require an uncommon honesty of approach. The ironic method runs the risk of evasion or even complicity in respect to the object of criticism; but the double vision resulting from ironic self-consciousness is bound to produce a higher form of art than one-dimensional political satire. True art, after all,

must please as well as instruct. Thus Birney recognizes in Chaucer "an irony not of the savage or gloomy sort which would ultimately brand him as clearly as open partisanship, but one just sufficiently whimsical and ambiguous to satisfy the intelligence and amuse the culture."[19] It is true that Birney criticizes Chaucer for this appeal to his upper-class audience. But he respects both the intrinsic survival value of such a compromise, and its artistic merits as a detached and more balanced perspective. Birney's ironic preference here, as clarified later in his own poetry, is exactly that taken by Rufus: a subtle but powerful presentation of social realities which speaks not to the political ear of the reader, but to his emotional center.

The crucial perspective on the ideological wrangling of the thirties was provided by World War Two. If Rufus was already writing with the benefit of a qualified journalistic mode of attack, the war forced Birney to withdraw even further from action to art. Just as political commitment was expressed by means of ironic satire, even that kind of concentration on theme gave way to a growing interest in form. Juggling of facts became coloring of metaphors, and the protective pseudonym became the even more distractive persona.

A detailed study of Birney's body of poems reveals few overt jabs at the stubborn walls of the status quo. Most of the previous social idealism is turned inward to issue in

ironic disaffection combined with realistic descriptive imagery. Birney thus may appear to have deserted his professed ideals of vital social change. Yet the optimistic humanism at the core of his work remains strong through the years, though depressed at times by the course of events. The development and experimentation of form is seen by some to be trivial, clever, and pointless;[20] the diction of early poems, on the one hand, may be read as artificial and forced, or in later poems, as lacking true power or force. In defense, however, what Birney has continually tried to do in his poetry is what Trotsky had hoped for the world: to bridge the gap between culture and mass, to resolve contradiction with commonly understood, spiritually unifying art.

Birney's poetic search has taken a similar course to his original development as a poet. That is, the journey winds ever inward. Theme relies increasingly on self-expressive form, until the form becomes a universal theme in itself. Birney has found first that even an imaginative confrontation with external nature is ultimately incomplete. Man is pitted in a continual struggle for physical and psychological survival against a harsh or indifferent environment; and even in the early poems he grasps that the true source of the problem is not in nature itself but in man. He then seeks to resolve the inner human contradictions, but still in an external way. He first satirizes the social world around him, and finds only more of the same on

a global scale. Throughout the long search, the poetic self becomes more and more isolated, more existentially depressed. Yet the penetrating insight grows as well, and the problem within man is found to contain its solution. Birney develops a sense of self-parody which reverses his self-limitation. The satire turned inward becomes Romantically or transcendentally ironic; and the result is self-liberating expression in Concrete, self-mimetic forms. Beyond the Concrete phase is a further exploration of ironic applications, whereby the poetic persona contains both human and natural worlds, and the primary vehicle is the basis of speech itself, sound and tone.

Friedrich Schlegel, writing in Germany at the inception of the Romantic era, was the leading theorist in what is now called "Romantic Irony." His approach is most helpful in understanding Birney's methods and motivations. Schlegel's term for such ironic antics as Birney uses is "transcendental buffoonery . . . the mood which surveys everything and rises infinitely above everything that is limited, even above one's own art, virtue, or genius."[21] The "transcendental" quality of the writing has important effects both on the art and on the artist, as well as on the reader. In respect to the form of the work, a kind of transcendence is achieved through the "license" of stylistic imagination that lies at the heart of romance. Here Schlegel finds

> a foundation for irony. The interest of the narration rests entirely on its form and treatment, which ought to be generally recognized as pleasing or remarkable, and the skill and art of the narrator should soar proportionately higher, because the charm of the narration depends on his style and treatment.[22]

A major blow is struck for the emphasis on form, with a foundation in centuries of romantic art. Equally important is the transcendence of the poetic spirit allowed in such a free relationship with the medium. At stake in the exercise of such artful detachment is nothing less than spiritual survival. G. G. Sedgewick (a former professor of Birney's, to whom the satirical novel *Turvey* was dedicated) paraphrases Schlegel, "'Romantic Irony enables men to sweep free and unfettered over circumstance'";[23] thus irony becomes the effective means for achieving the ideal of transcendence.

Through revelation in the formal mode itself, the artist is freed from the finite limitations of political battle in rhetoric or even satire, where his serious efforts are doomed to failure or compromise. But far from being a mere escape from conflict, Romantic Irony signifies a real and meaningful approach to a solution, through an understanding of conflict as universal paradox and self-parody. Any comprehensive solution to ecological or social problems does not rest with concrete increments of change; it *includes* them, and includes also a perspective of their limitations from beyond. Meanwhile, the deeper, spiritual conflicts of the time are confronted; and the approach of the Romantic Ironist aims at a resolution. Birney's emphasis on delight

and pleasure in the detached construction of his art indicates that man can learn to appreciate now, in this finite life, the infinite joys of creation, or the common struggles have no final purpose.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Richard H. Robillard, *Earle Birney* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971), p. 5.

[2]Ibid., p. 5.

[3]Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972); Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971).

[4]As in Frank Davey, *Earle Birney* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1971) throughout his opening chapter; see also R. L. McDougall, "The Dodo and the Cruising Auk: Class in Canadian Literature," *Canadian Literature*, 18 (Autumn 1963), 6-20.

[5]Davey, pp. 8-9.

[6]Ibid., p. 9.

[7]Ibid., p. 2.

[8]Peter C. Noel-Bentley, "Earle Birney: A Bibliography in Progress, 1923-1969," *West Coast Review*, 5, No. 2 (October 1970), 49.

[9]Davey, p. 12.

[10]Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (1924; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1957), p. 9.

[11]Davey, p. 14.

[12]Trotsky, p. 60.

[13]Davey, p. 14.

[14]Ibid., p. 15.

[15]"Chaucers' Irony," 2 vols., Diss. Univ. of Toronto, 1936, Ch. I, 1.

[16]Ibid., I, 4.

[17]Davey, p. 17.

[18]"Chaucer's Irony," I, iii.

[19]Ibid., IV, 53.

[20]As early as Robin Skelton's review of *ICBS* in *Tamarack Review*, 29 (1963); briefly in A. J. M. Smith, "A Unified Personality: Birney's Poems," *Canadian Literature*, 30 (1966), 143-44; again in Hayden Carruth, "Up, Over, and Out: The Poetry of Distraction," *Tamarack Review*, 42 (1967); and finally in the reviews of *R&BS* (1971) by Carl Ballstadt, *Canadian Forum*, 51 (July-August 1971); Fred Cogswell, *Canadian Literature*, 49 (1971); and Andy Wainwright, *Saturday Night*, 86 (May 1971); all rpt. in Bruce Nesbitt, ed., *Earle Birney* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974). Excellent critical defense is provided in the same volume, however, by Birney in a Letter to the Editor of the *Tamarack Review*, 30 (1963), the Preface to *Four Parts Sand* (1972), and the Epilogue in Nesbitt, pp. 208, 213; as well as by Lionel Kearns, *Georgia Straight*, March 1971; and Judith Copithorne, *Georgia Straight*, No. 151 (October 1971); in reviewing *R&BS*, bp nichol's Introduction to *Pnomes* (1969); and Nesbitt's own Introduction, especially pp. 9-14.

[21]*Lyceums-Fragmente* 42 (1797), quoted by Hans Eichner, *Friedrich Schlegel* (New York: Twayne, 1970), p. 72.

[22]"Treatise on the Study of Romantic Poetry," (1812), in *The Aesthetic and Miscellaneous Works of Frederick von Schlegel*, tr. E. J. Millington (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1849), p. 222.

[23]*Of Irony: Especially in Drama* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto, 1948), pp. 14-15.

CHAPTER II

"DAVID":

MAN AGAINST NATURE: THE DRAMATIC IRONY OF METAPHOR

> to concretize that theme of the duality of mountains which I'd already chosen, and also the duality of experience to be encountered by men who roam in them. A double doubleness. . . .
>
> --Birney, *The Cow Jumped Over the Moon*, p. 16.

Although the central theme of Birney's first book of poems is his immediate concern with the Second World War, he embodies that theme most effectively in natural metaphor. He sees the outer conflict taking place in the world at the time as analogous to, and rooted in, a deeper substantial duality of man living in nature--already at war with a part of his own being. "David" serves well as a title poem for this volume by virtue of its allegorical strength, pitting Man against Nature. This is the primal confrontation in the battle of survival, and the most elemental source of irony in a cosmos consisting of life and death. The particular tragic symbolism of "David" has archetypal relations with primitive myth, Biblical legend, Greek drama, Teutonic epic, and medieval and modern romance. The heroic quest and subsequent failure and return reflect as well the context of Canadian literature, with its syndrome of bleak adventure

into a hostile environment.

"David" both grows out of and expands away from Birney's personal experience with the war. The fledgling poet, already in his late thirties, was facing a new problem of "natural" death by aging, as well as attempting to exorcise an older adversary, the inhuman but alluring mountains which overshadowed his early life. He relates,

> It was the duality of those Rockies--like the war, both challenging and treacherous--or better, it was the duality of Man I was after. It's not stone that lures and betrays, but man the animal, carrying within him zest and grief, youth and age, love and hate, life and death.[1]

The writing of "David," as Birney describes, was a way of containing these greatest dualities in a unified framework, a distillation into "some form that was concentrated and symbolic."[2] The quest and its climax provide an initiation for the survivor-narrator into the ironic duality of nature, which is found to lead back to man.

Through a metaphorical use of dramatic irony, Birney makes it clear that his real purpose, as a poet, is to initiate the reader into the world of experience. The reader has the aesthetic advantage of seeing first through the subjective eyes of the poet, through the unconscious vision of the narrator. With the shock of the sudden and self-blamed death of his friend, Bob's subconscious world takes over. The reader must now share the narrator's illusions, which are nonetheless almost palpably real. Here Birney's ironic vision faces similar peaks and depths. The

emotional ambiguity of his ending in "David" is characteristic of his whole poetic work. "David" is unique in its use of metaphor in such a dramatic sense; its irony works through the fundamental duality of its language. The desired initiation is not just *into* the world as the narrator experiences it, but *away* from it as well; for insofar as that experience is subjective, it is largely illusory. Thus the movement is *through* experience to a deeper intimation of reality.

Just as the physical quest for a higher vision is reversed to end with the darkest kind of vision, the search for objective truth fails. David could read the language of nature, but only as metaphor:

> the scroll of coral in limestone
> And the beetle-seal in the shale of ghostly trilobites,
> Letters delivered to man from the Cambrian waves.
> (IV.6-8)[3]

He teaches Bob to "read" these natural signs, but the reader knows, as the climb and its narrative continue, that Bob sees, at best, nothing but geologic fact. The attempted travelogue reflects a deeper blindness to the tragedy in store. Bob's account is neutral and straightforward in his literal eyes, but his language as poetic persona tells more. Where he sees innocent romantic beauty, his mind's eye reveals more in his words:

> We crawled astride
> The peak to feast on the marching ranges flagged
> By the fading shreds of the shattered stormcloud. . . .
> (III.7-9)

When his subconscious horror is finally released, he is similarly trapped into literal vision. He has progressed to understand metaphor, yet now he cannot see beyond it. The reader is always a step ahead.

But as David so stoically accepts the necessity of his death as it is written in rock, so the reader must follow his guide, from

> the larches' edge,
> . . . a long green surf of juniper flowing
> Away from the wind,
> (II.15-17)

through the shock of the fall, and so back down

> and into the spectral larches,
> Alone.
> (IX.13-14)

The truest glimpse of the reality of nature to be found in "David" is through the language of the imagination, which is man's inmost nature. If that feeling-charged vision is not true enough, then the reader must return, with Bob, from that "last" mountain of vision back to "the survey,"

> the ruck of the camp, the surly
> Poker, the wrangling, the snoring under the fetid Tents,
> (I.4-6)

and dreams to be named later. Such dream-journeys need not be formless; as the poet finds, they cannot. Birney proves with the strength of his art that, as a kind of impressionist, "the rejection of original participation [in nature] may mean, not the destruction but the liberations of images."[4]

Thus the venture into nature and imaginative language is not meant to advocate retreat, but rather to represent a purgatorial progression to psychic balance.

Despite the dangers of presumptive pride, the poet must again venture forth from negation to speak to his fellow man. Having learned from experience not to trust completely in gods, God, nature, or man, the artist does find one power that works. Harold Bloom finds that

> The creative process is the hero of Romantic poetry, and imaginative inhibitions, of every kind, necessarily must be the antagonists of the poetic quest. The special puzzle of Romanticism is the dialectical role that nature had to take in the revival of the mode of romance. Most simply, Romantic nature poetry, . . . was an anti-nature poetry . . . [e.g., in Wordsworth], the healing function is performed only when the poetry shows the power of the mind over outward sense.[5]

The best examples of art of this kind capture the essence of nature by shaping its spirit into a verbal harmony, by pouring organism into organic form. The worst artists overdo it, so that excess emotion spills over. But in Birney's hands what Ruskin called the "pathetic fallacy" is intentional and ironic; so that when "violent feelings . . . produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things,"[6] we are made even more aware of the error. Birney allows the foreshadowed terror to be released and to dominate his narrator's consciousness on the way down the mountain. But the snowballing effect remains controlled in the convention of the persona.

Birney's control of his medium occurs at every level of technique: not only in the use of dramatic and metaphorical irony, but in the metrical, even "Concrete" dimensions of the poem as linguistic artifact, or macro-metaphor. He admits of "David" that "the impulses behind it were . . . only secondarily narrative."[7] Focusing directly on the printed page, Birney grants little to illusion: "what is offered is not the pain but the pleasure of the art of words."[8] This fundamental attitude which stamps Birney as a Romantic ironist may be traced to his primary definition of the "nature of poetry" (in *The Cow Jumped Over the Moon*, a book about the writing of "David"): "a poem is an art object, something begun in personal fancy and developed by a kind of serious play."[9] This attitude, in turn, is expressed perhaps most eloquently by Wordsworth, in his "Preface to the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)." He finds the consolation of poetic composition to be related to, perhaps even higher than, the joy of experiencing nature, in giving

> an overbalance of pleasure. Now the music of harmonious metrical language, the sense of difficulty overcome, and the blind association of pleasure which has been previously received from works of rhyme or metre of the same or similar construction, an indistinct perception perpetually renewed of language closely resembling real life, and yet, in the circumstance of metre, differing from it so widely--all these imperceptibly make up a complex feeling of delight, which is of the most important use in tempering the painful feeling always found intermingled with powerful descriptions of the deeper passions.[10]

The judicious use of meter, rhyme, and more minute symbols of image and sound amplifies the power of the dramatic movement, while also orchestrating it.

First, the excessive alliteration and use of compound constructions, or kennings ("wing-broken," "sunhot," "frog-song") combined with the regular five-beat line, shows the work to derive from Birney's professional knowledge of Anglo-Saxon. Although a beat has been added to the traditional four, his lines conform to the basic two-measure division of stresses, with a flexible number of syllables to fit the flow of description. If Birney indeed exploits Wordsworth's "blind association," the poem will thus recall the Teutonic world, where "the grim, the gloomy side of earth predominates."[11] Yet this modern epic, in its total effect, is a unique blend of modern conversational diction within the rhythmic heart of the English language.

John Sutherland, in his appraisal of "David," appreciates the advantage of this modern idiom in meeting the challenge of modern life: "It widens in scope, it includes more of thought and emotion, as life in general and modern life in particular press and bear against it. It catches and holds all the complex elements in a great net."[12] Language itself becomes a tool for survival. Specifically applied, Birney's loose but steady pace "is a pedestrian rhythm without any pretension. It seems inevitable for the description of mountain-climbing." The effect is produced

by the use of anapestic and iambic feet, a rhythm "rising from one or two weak syllables to a strong stress."[13] This wilderness trek is a fit setting for such natural dangers and joys as the Anglo-Saxons themselves may have experienced. And the basic rhythm, as Sutherland points out, can also absorb such elemental pitfalls: "The rhythm has a recuperative power. It invites falls and lapses, because strength is developed out of them, and more than the initial progress is made."[14] Thus the new line iconographically bridges the gap between the differing problems of survival in ancient and modern times. Its driving spirit is a kind of linguistic adaptation with the symbolic power to overcome both.

The combined effect of his formal skills reinforces Birney's ironic theme. He acknowledges his debt to poetic tradition in this respect: "if 'David' does create moods of nostalgia and fatality, celebrating youthful heroism and yet elegizing its loss, it's partly because of the sonorous cadences these technical devices produce."[15] His rhyme scheme, *abba*, is a key ingredient behind the above observation. So is the simple but effective technique of enjambement, which causes the reader to gasp as he reads,

> Without
>
> A gasp he was gone.
>
> (VII.24-25)

Such a modest beginning anticipates Birney's later adventures into the graphic wilds of Concrete form; and it substantiates his early awareness of the primacy of his form.

As Bob returns to the oppressive atmosphere of the survey camp, the sympathetic reader is reminded that the climb itself was a quest for aesthetic experience. Unnecessary for physical survival, indeed denying it for one climber, the journey undergone guarantees a stronger psychic survival for the one who lives through it. Birney's own art is an attempt both to render the painful experience valuable to readers, and to achieve the aesthetic vision that eluded his characters.

One must not be dismayed, then, at the failure of union with nature and its external beauty. Birney offers ironic solace for that fortunate failure, without which the more complete marriage of inner and outer vision would not have been gained. Bruce Nesbitt is reminded by "David" that "The Fall of Man was necessary for him to know good and evil, and thus to be truly human."[16] Birney has translated the Biblical moral into an aesthetic lesson, which Bob conveys when he is tempted by the idolatrous apples of his eye: the romantic illusions of the climb, the distant but fatal view, and the Satanic landscape which follows. The Fall itself, allegorically speaking, is deserved by human pride, which in turn extends to man's whole history as he seeks to hold dominion over the earth. The narrator learns the consequences, as he

turned to look north
At the glistening wedge of giant Assiniboine, heedless
Of handhold. And one foot gave. I swayed and shouted.
(VII.19-21)

The narrator learns from his terrifying quest a redemptive lesson about physical survival and its dependence on clear and immediate, but also imaginative, vision. Such insight would have allowed him to see in the natural signs, at least in the most obvious "splayed white ribs/ Of a mountain goat" (III.13-14) and the "robin gyrating/ In grass, wing-broken" (V.10-11), the danger which lay in wait; and it would likewise have made his subconscious delusions after disaster unnecessary. But such rear-vision is superfluous to the allegorical necessity of Birney's story. The poet is not just concerned with a literal moral. Bob's experience serves best as a lesson to the reader, and not about mountain-climbing, but about imaginative vision itself. Birney's own journey through metaphor dramatically demonstrates that the root of aesthetic experience grows from the psyche; that survival depends on both objective clarity and subjective interpretation; that natural beauty may be felt most clearly in the balance and unity that art is made to capture.

The unified organic form of "David" recalls the English exemplar of that ideal, especially as the poets find a common loss. Arthur O. Lovejoy finds in "Dejection, An Ode" Coleridge's self-overcoming, much like Birney's fate and strength:

> as artist, he finds a certain triumph in defeat; for he is able to derive, and to impart, aesthetic pleasure from the very emotion aroused by his inability to experience aesthetic pleasure--or at all events, from the poetic utterance of that emotion. The Ode is a paradox among poems in that it not merely--like many other poems--makes melancholy enjoyable, but achieves beauty by the description of the loss of the feeling for beauty.[17]

The modern romance must face the limitations of mortal man, just as Coleridge found

> I may not hope from outward forms to win
> The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.[18]

Through expression of the deepest imaginative links to the world of nature, however far from objectivity that expression is, the soul itself finds release and visible union between nature and man, between man and man. Nor must man forget

> O Lady! we receive but what we give,
> And in our life alone does Nature live.[19]

If Coleridge's romantic fountains are within, so are Birney's mountains. Though his narrator has fallen, at least he has survived to tell his tale. Similarly, Birney has not overcome the most pressing obstacles to his ideals. The world of social conflict he finds to be deaf to pleas of reason; and even Canadian nature may not be romanticized easily. But he finds a way of compromise in the aesthetic medium. Here, and only here, may irreducible dualities be brought to union, however tense. The search for peace and beauty is reconciled with an opposite force in the world which fosters destruction and horror. The dramatic tone in "David," then, as expressed in the divergent images man has

of nature, speaks for ironic survival. That is, Birney advocates neither path of outward vision, the ascendingly beautiful nor the terrible descent, but an inner faith which walks level between the two.

FOOTNOTES

[1]*The Cow Jumped Over the Moon* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), pp. 7-8.

[2]Ibid., p. 8.

[3]"David," *David and Other Poems* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1942), pp. 1-11.

[4]Owen Barfield, "Symptoms of Iconoclasm," *Saving the Appearances* (1957), rpt. in Harold Bloom, ed., *Romanticism and Consciousness* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970), p. 46.

[5]"The Internalization of Quest Romance," *Yale Review*, 58 (1969), rpt. in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, p. 9.

[6]John Ruskin, "Of the Pathetic Fallacy," *Modern Painters* (1856), Vol. III, Part 4, Ch. 12, rpt. in M. H. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), II, 1286.

[7]*Cow*, p. 14.

[8]Ibid., p. 13.

[9]Ibid., p. 2.

[10]William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)," rpt. in David Perkins, ed., *English Romantic Writers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), p. 329.

[11]Francis T. Palgrave, *Landscape in Poetry from Homer to Tennyson* (London: Macmillan, 1897), p. 109.

[12]"Earle Birney's *David*," *First Statement*, 9 (n.d.), rpt. in Nesbitt, p. 45.

[13]Robillard, p. 9.

[14]Nesbitt, p. 45.

[15]*Cow*, p. 21.

[16]Nesbitt, p. 33.

[17]"Coleridge and Kant's Two Worlds," *ELH*, 7 (1940), rpt. in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: George Braziller, 1955), p. 263.

[18]Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Dejection, An Ode," (1802), rpt. in Elisabeth Schneider, ed., *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Selected Poetry and Prose*, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 132.

[19]Ibid., p. 132.

CHAPTER III

TRIAL OF A CITY:

THE IRONY OF CIVILIZATION: SATIRE AND SELF-PARODY

> *Trial of a City* . . . marked a distinct advance on the simple and unified narrative "David," mingling as it did the colloquial and the grand styles and the satirical and the affirmative modes. It thus anticipates the South and Central American poems of the sixties and fuses perfectly for the first time in Birney's work the two themes that Northrop Frye has named as central to Canadian poetry, "one a primarily comic theme of satire and exuberance, the other a primarily tragic theme of loneliness and terror."
>
> --A. J. M. Smith, "A Unified Personality: Birney's Poems," (1966), rpt. in Nesbitt, p. 149.

Introduction: The Ironic Comedy

Earle Birney's verse-play *Trial of a City* highlights an expanded field of reference for his central concern of survival. Birney no longer limits himself to the ruminating reflections of the individual locked in mortal struggle against a hostile environment. With that early preoccupation, Birney attempted to come to terms with the wider problems of the society and the world as a whole. But it was necessary first to experience a process of growth out of a frustrated idealism. The overpowering immediate presence of the war was the main obstacle to objective poetic detachment, and to the indispensable free play of the ironic

imagination. But with the coming of peace, and a more subjectively felt crisis of human survival, these artistic developments prove to be Birney's real strengths.

In dealing with personal survival in wartime, *Turvey* (1949) overcomes the barrier of suffocating seriousness; and *Down the Long Table* (1955) attempts to reconcile individual aspiration with a particular social milieu, the class struggle. Both novels are significant in their movement from intense personal lyricism and formal stylistics to the prose medium, which is more reflective of the new thematic direction toward broad-humored parody and manifest survival on a mass public scale. But the volume of poetry and its versified drama offer assured evidence of the poetic medium's capacity to handle the more complexly realized problems. Although the novels articulate a wider vision than previously possible for Birney, they still center around the autobiographical hero, the fictionalized exploits of the author-character in confronting a dehumanizing environment. *Trial of a City* makes use of the more eccentric lyrical mode, yet distributes it effectively among various individuals in order to fashion a composite view of the city in terms of its people. The result is more than equal to the success of the prose in handling the dilemmas of modern society.

The actual plot of the play, though thematically one of universal application, is necessarily limited to a workable human scale. In the same way that "David" carries meta-

physical implications in the allegorical narrative of two mountain climbers, *Trial of a City* embodies ultimate concerns about civilization in a specific local context--Vancouver. The play may be aesthetically rewarding for its universality; but its primary subject is the city itself, which is quite specifically attacked, defended, ridiculed, and redeemed. From this elementary level of satire, broader connections to the whole of Western, urban, commercial society are naturally implied. Finally, the concrete characterization holds up not only through these two levels of reference, but as a real source of insight into the deepest roots of the problem--the essential traits of social man, containing the seeds of civilization, destruction, and determined survival.

Trial of a City stands out as the most complete statement of Birney's growing poetic sensibility in this second major phase of development. He summarizes and completes his previous themes, building them up to the level of universal concerns: man's need to define a life that can be successful and meaningful in a hostile wilderness, yet still compatible with its preeminent natural base; and his need to overcome his own self-destructiveness. *Trial of a City* succeeds in joining these two related problems into an artistic whole. The allegorical format extends and completes an identification of nature's and man's destructiveness which previously can be seen only through metaphor, in personified or animated natural imagery. Here the destructive nature of cosmic time

is aligned with its human counterpart, the historically continuous and perverse desire of man to exterminate man. Human nature is the central issue, but surrounding it is the relentless first cause of "Damnation" in the universe itself. This ultimate power is the unnamed "client" represented by agent Gabriel Powers, its dictates issued by the "Office of the Future." Such an allegorical framework is an excellent method of combining comment on the tragic unfeeling nature of time, and on the faceless bureaucracies of man's own making. The latter, represented by P. S. Legion, is of an obviously inferior order (if differing only in degree), and therefore opens the human side of this double conspiracy to comic attack.

If Birney's play effectively fuses his major thematic concerns, his poetic style is an equally comprehensive summation of his wide range of talents. At first glance, the juxtaposition of such diverse speaking styles may seem too stark, too artificial, a mere display of verbal virtuosity. Yet the language is always appropriate to its speaker; and if the characters seem to be an arbitrary melange of irrelevant types, it must be remembered that the play does not pretend more than a farcical plot. The stylization of roles in such a fantastic comedy must be expected to be extreme, if one starts from its panhistorical premise; in the hands of a poet it will be more so. The logical feeling of clashes in tone stems from this extended stylization. Shakespeare

could use verse on the stage and make it sound natural, because his variations in voices were essentially based on a source of tone that was unified, at least, by a common historical context. Birney's characters come not only from vastly differing social positions, as did Shakespeare's, but from an historical range that reaches from Anglo-Saxon times to the near future ("five years later").[1] Strict unity of time and place is sacrificed for wider allegorical needs, and microcosm gives way to survey.

Allowing a sympathetic acceptance of the fictional convention at work, the play's purposes freely unfold. The widely contrasting styles of speech of the various witnesses in the trial serve both as satiric reflections on their own respective limitations, and as a cumulative comic effect of incongruity. Such a babble and confluence of diversity is what builds a city; and in this aspect the serious faults of Vancouver are lightened. The emphasis is clearly on real human reactions to the inhuman abstraction inherent in urban existence. The irony in their speeches reflects this paradox of humanity living en masse: though all of the witnesses show little desire to protect the city on trial, they are all living parts of it, each in his own time and in his own special spirit. This irony is apparently resolved with the final appearance of an actually living witness (in contrast to the historical dead), who, in the ritual style and function of the Greek chorus, speaks for them all in their common

enduring humanity. This "Mrs. Anyone" redeems the concept of city as human habitation, reducing to serious reality the otherwise comic spectacle of the city's damnation. Yet her role is in turn undercut as subtly as the rest, and the reader is thrown back to a tenuously suspended judgment.

Birney calls the revised version of his play *Damnation of Vancouver: A Comedy in Seven Episodes*. First presented in 1957,[2] there are only minor substantive changes in the later text; so that the original *Trial of a City* may also be rightly considered a comedy. The play includes several stock comic conventions in both plot and character; yet it must be qualified in the end as an ironic variation of simpler comic modes. Northrop Frye's analysis of comedy in *The Anatomy of Criticism* is the most useful for this discussion of archetypal patterns of form.

"In the first place," observes Frye,

> the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another. At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters are in charge of the play's society, and the audience recognizes that they are usurpers. At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallize around the hero, and the moment when this crystallization occurs is the point of resolution in the action, the comic discovery.[3]

Birney's variation of this pattern recalls the irony of "David." Here also the movement is away from what Frye calls a "demonic" personification of the "vast, menacing, stupid powers of nature," where "The machinery of fate is administered by a set of remote invisible gods" (the Office of the future

of the Future) "whose freedom and pleasure are ironic because they exclude man," and who "demand sacrifices, punish presumption, and enforce obedience to natural and moral law as an end in itself."[4] As in "David," recognition comes when these inhuman "Powers" are seen as ultimately human in origin.

Again, Frye's formula works conveniently to describe Birney's *Trial*. As he characterizes it, "The action of comedy in moving from one social center to another is not unlike the action of a lawsuit, in which plaintiff and defendant construct different versions of the same situation, one finally being judged as real and the other as illusory."[5] As Birney makes most clear in the testimony of William Langland, author of *Piers Plowman*, Vancouver is really a human hell, not unlike Frye's demonic archetype, "the world . . . of perverted or wasted work, ruins and catacombs, instruments of torture and monuments of folly." And, Frye concludes, "Hence one of the central themes of demonic imagery is parody."[6] Birney's parody in this play is infinite, extending not only through but to Langland and finally to himself as poet. As "the social judgement against the absurd is closer to the comic norm than the moral judgement against the wicked,"[7] this comedy applies to all men, shown by Birney's ironic characterizations to be more absurd than wicked. And the root of human absurdity is belief in illusion.

What Frye considers as the most "intense irony" to be found in comedy may be found in Birney's play. It "is achieved when the humorous society simply disintegrates without anything taking its place."[8] Vancouver does gain a verdict of temporary salvation, but only after all of its people have been discredited. One is once again reminded of "David," whose narrator is saved by the death of his only companion; and whose poetry works despite, even because of, its artful pathetic fallacy. Even Mrs. Anyone, the average living housewife, is not adequate to stand on her simplistic faith alone. Her function is allegorical, as is Bob's; as a limited persona she beckons to reader and audience to fill the void left by the shattered illusions of the former society. This appeal to the ultimate witnesses, judges and jury of human reality is in fact a central convention of the comic mode, essentially an "invitation to the audience to form part of the comic society. . . . The resolution of comedy comes, so to speak, from the audience's side of the stage."[9] In *Trial of a City* even the transcendentally articulate Powers is forced to a draw, and the hero must be the author, who invites his guests to join him.

The Principal Characters

The analysis of comedy given by Frye highlights three principal character types: "the *alazons* or impostors, the *eirons* or self-deprecators, and the buffoons."[10] These are

to be recognized in Birney's *Trial* respectively as: "The chief spokesman for both the present and commercialism . . . the city's counsel, Mr. P. S. (pseudo) Legion, whose speech is a catalogue of Chamber of Commerce and Tourist Bureau clichés,"[11] the mythical archangel Gabriel Powers, "of Queendom, Powers, Prince and Policy,"[12] and the blameless Minister of History, or "President" in *Damnation*, who "Makes a Pontius Pilate gesture of washing his hands."[13] Yet the complexity of Birney's art is indicated by the fact that each of these characters is an impostor, an unwitting self-deprecator, and a buffoon. Indeed, these traits are shared by each of his six witnesses, in varying degrees. But for the sake of simplicity, Frye's type-structure may suffice.

"The contest of *eiron* and *alazon* forms the basis of the comic action, and the buffoon and the churl polarize the comic mood."[14] If the "churl" may be seen to characterize the homely, puckish Mrs. Anyone, the emphasis remains on the contest between Powers and Legion. Frye continues:

> The humorous blocking characters of comedy are nearly always impostors, though it is more frequently a lack of self-knowledge than simple hypocrisy that characterizes them. The multitudes of comic scenes in which one character soliloquizes while another makes sarcastic asides to the audience show the contest of *eiron* and *alazon* in its purest form, and show too that the audience is sympathetic to the *eiron* side.[15]

Such overt confrontations emphasize the limitations inherent in every line of the *alazon's* speech. But effective as such action is on the surface, Birney's pervasive irony makes it impossible to rest with such an easy occupation of opposite

poles.

Vancouver's official defense is in the obviously dubious hands of P. S. Legion, whose name implies both the urban multitude and its institutionalized character (possibly referring to "Public School," and certainly to the Canadian Legion). It quickly becomes clear from his attitude and speech that Legion is an *alazon*, or impostor, who obstructs true justice in his usurpation of the city's defense. The climax of the play comes with Legion's banishment at the hands of Mrs. Anyone; whereby the impostor himself is economically disposed of as a scapegoat,[16] to appease the gods and make way for the new society.

The stage is set for Legion's replacement, however, as soon as he opens his mouth. Though he speaks for a large number of active civic interests, he shows a proportionate lack of finesse:

> Really, Mr. Minister, this seems to me irregular.
> I don't know what you're pulling, but I hope it's
> not our leg you are.
>
> (*T*. p. 2)

The tone of the ridiculous emerges from this very first speech, and continues throughout. Legion stands firmly behind his one-sided approach to the end, when he sums up his basic belief and sensibility:

> Well all I need to say is, we've got faith in B.C.
> Our motto's "We Prosper By Land and By Sea."
> There's billions still to be made from our greenery
> And the mountains will always be there for scenery.
> We're the hub of Tomorrow, the Future's baby,
> We're here to stay, and I don't mean maybe.
>
> (*T*. p. 40)

This, obviously, "is the doggerel of the ad-man, and is uttered with the assurance of a limited mind that completely believes its own clichés."[17] But it is doggerel admirably contrived for the very purpose of limiting the reader's confidence in the speaker.

If one's faith in Legion as a worthy representative of humanity is destroyed, there is the alternative of the Superman, Gabriel Powers. Birney balances his own negativism with a "proportion in which present man becomes the ape of his counterpart in the future, as in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra.*"[18] Legion's unwitting doggerel is contrasted with the free-ranging linguistic wit of the personable *eiron*, whose controlled understatement is bound to capture the imaginative sympathy of the audience. Yet if the reader is taken in by Powers' oracular eloquence, he must deny allegiance to the cause of the earthly city.

Gabriel's dual role of destroyer and messenger is symbolically central in Birney's vision of the continuous challenge of human survival. More than symbolic, Powers' language reflects the poet's most literal attempts to destroy illusion and replace it with concrete indicators of elusive reality. His use of words must be like that of history's first and most noted *eiron*, Socrates: that is, writes Schlegel, "both playful and serious, both frank and obvious and yet deeply hidden"; or as Hans Eichner adds, "profoundly ambiguous."[19]

A simple example of the way in which Birney conveys his thematic ironies in such a compressed form may be found in Powers' second speech:

> Somewhen the Future will, and no why sooner,
> damn most god-naturely Vancouver.
>
> (*T*. p. 3)

More to the point in his role as a comic foil to Legion, he has the advantage of hiding his snide asides in puns: "I should be gleed if Mr. Legion inter-raps whenever he lacks" (*T*. p. 36). And in answer to his most formidable challenger, the undaunted Mrs. Anyone, Powers quips,

> And though your smile is dew upon a mourning web
> Our snake has Eved the spider.
>
> (*T*. p. 42)

These last lines reveal Powers' paradoxical role once again; for when he says "Our," he speaks not only for the dreadful Office of the Future, but for humanity in the act of creating it.

When Frye turns his critical sights on Birney's work itself, he notes that this Gabriel is more than (or less than) a simple divine agency. He commands more sympathy by virtue of his truthful subtlety, but less in regard to his bleak message. For, as Frye concludes, "Powers, . . . who seems to be a messenger of the gods, is actually a projection of man's own death wish."[20] His role as an embodiment of human folly thus undercuts his surface superiority. As in "David," man's personified gods are seen as self-delusions. And just as Powers has exposed Legion's role as a sham,

Birney may be seen smiling behind Powers' back. In effect, Powers' ironic powers appear shallow by comparison.

The archangel indeed represents a superior self-knowledge, combined with an awareness of man's inevitable fate. But in affirming that transcendent reality, one must deny humanity. Birney's paradox remains essentially unsolved until his common housewife completes the spectrum of imperfect mortal possibilities. She replaces Legion with a viable *human* reality, who can speak for Vancouver's salvation.

In terms of helping the cause of human survival, with the emphasis on preserving what is decently human, artistic prophecy need not be revolutionary; it may even be fundamentally conservative. Then Gabriel Powers' oracular language of the future is only superficially progressive, as are the fast-growth public policies of Legion's Vancouver. Standing against them both is the humbly proud Mrs. Anyone, with her good-hearted, homely verse and traditional domestic ideals. Marshall McLuhan qualifies this function of the prophetic arts: "While the arts as radar feedback provide a dynamic and changing corporate image, their purpose may be not to enable us to change but rather to maintain an even course toward permanent goals, even amidst the most disrupting innovations."[21] Survival is Birney's most permanent goal; its chief obstacle is mass delusion, which sponsors both wars against nature and man; its hope lies in dispelling the

illusions which surround and mislead humanity.

Along with the illusions of commercial representation and divine administration of fate, Birney focuses his ironic glass on the common subjection to the dictates of "History." The society as courtroom is seen first of all in the control of a somewhat bumbling, but competent enough, Minister of History. The reader/audience is expected to recognize that a regenerative change of some kind is due. However, the Minister is not actually a prime cause of obstruction in the play. He is rather a benevolent buffoon, or *"miles gloriosus* . . . a man of words rather than deeds."[22] In contrast to the tangible obstructions which lie in the slogans of Legion and in the "death-wish" represented by Powers, the Minister serves to highlight the general illusion of "History" itself. But in the living presence of the historical dead, the Minister joins Powers and Legion as implicitly irrational and abstract figures, who dominate the courtroom struggle, and who all must be replaced.

Birney's characterization of the Minister makes his opinion of official history clear: the Minister begins by losing his gavel; he ends with the judgment taken from his mouth by Powers, after letting Mrs. Anyone push Legion out the permanent exit door. Yet he does keep a loose and humorous order in the court: "Everything's beautifully regular," (*T.* p. 2), he proclaims. His prose style is sufficient only to carry the proceedings along smoothly; "History" is

more of an overseer than a vital, primary force.

On the other hand, Birney himself has a deeper conception of history, beyond the provincial boundaries of even the "Freed State of Columbia" (*T.* p. 1). His ultimate view in this symbolic trial is of "a society confounded by its sense of its mortality, or of what Mircea Eliade, in *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, calls a Western 'awareness of historicity' which 'discloses the anxiety of confronting Death and Non-Being'."[23] History must be successfully rendered into mythic entities, in order to keep the imaginative spirit active. Birney achieves such a subjective transformation with the introduction of historical figures from Vancouver's past into his play. Their versified speech adds a mythic dimension of vital immediacy to the flat ministrations of textbook history. This more poetic kind of historical sense, T. S. Eliot has observed, "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence"; to which the editor's note is added, "A sense, that is, of its relevance now--of the extent to which the past is entering into the content of the present, creating and forming the present into what it is."[24] It is an illusion to see time as a process of continual obliteration, or damnation. The reality that Birney seeks through his use of history is a freedom rooted in the facts of daily existence. Historical lives made real join with the life of the housewife, negating both the loss of the past to the present, and the loss of the

present to the future.

The problem at hand, what W. H. New calls "the anguish of historicity,"[25] is not so much a specific enchainment to the past, but of anxiety in confronting a threatening Future that the historical past implies. The solution may be approached through that movement of consciousness essential to comedy, "from a society controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the older characters to a society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom"; that is, "from illusion to reality."[26] Eliade confirms the importance of consciousness in facing the "anguish" of history: he observes that the "state of ignorance and illusion is not that of *living* in History, but of *believing in* its ontological reality."[27] Hence Birney's approach to the problem by dispelling the various illusions of individual and collective belief. The artistic structure in turn stands, *as a whole*, for a lasting and living faith in humanity. The inferior mythos of history is supplanted by the more fully human mythos of art.

Irony dispels illusion by extending it to its absurd limits. Frye's review of *Trial* itself makes note of Birney's motivating ironic intention by typing Legion's speech in terms of the German *knittelvers*.[28] Turning to his general analysis, one finds that what Frye means is "Deliberate doggerel, as we have it in *Hudibras* or German *knittelvers*, [which] can be a source of brilliant rhetorical satire, and

one which involves a kind of parody of poetic creation itself."[29] Legion is not alone as a victim of his own speech. Powers and the Minister also represent human illusion and self-limitation, as revealed through their manners of speaking. On its most ironic level, the comedy reveals its author's own sense of self-limitation. Presenting himself as a composite city, Birney is his own *alazon, eiron* and buffoon.

The Witnesses: Ironic Understatement

Though his satire is pointedly negative, Birney's irony is prophetically progressive. As Wayne Booth's study, *A Rhetoric of Irony* concludes, "The trick is in developing a habit of great skepticism about one's own hypothesis, and great flexibility in trying out alternatives."[30] All of the "witnesses" offer direct testimony for Birney's own beliefs and poetic abilities. The first three use understatement, and the last three overstatement, in advancing the flow of satire, primarily at Legion's expense. But Birney manages to override the understaters, and undercut the overstaters, in a simultaneous parody of his own poetic views and voices. He is engaging in what Schlegel labels "transcendental buffoonery," which is further defined:

> Internally: the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations, even above one's own art, virtue, or genius; externally, in its execution: the mimic style of an averagely gifted Italian *buffo*.[31]

The poet is playing the dramatist, and so no character quite reveals the real Birney. In effect, every character becomes an impostor for the actual poet, who stands as an *eiron* behind them all.

The first three witnesses all represent points of view favoring the side of nature in the case against the city. All are given Powers' support in satiric attack on Legion and his narrow defense. And all speak for Birney, though for the most part they are Birney's past voices, and only facets of a more complex and mobile, and finally more balanced sensibility. As witnesses for nature's preeminence, these three use a natural tone of ironic understatement of their seemingly obvious case. Captain Vancouver, for instance, is able to use a pastoral nostalgia in a tone of classical moderation, drawing on nature in both form and expanse of time. A feeling of closeness to nature is seen as well to influence the metaphorical insight of the Salish testimony; and natural reverence of a different sort is found in the archaic forms and the objective view of the scientist. Garnett Sedgewick has noted a general connection relevant to Birney's ironic method here, which may have been a direct influence on the writing of the play itself--since Sedgewick was a teacher of Birney's and received the dedication of *Turvey*. He has found, through historical study, that "the actual trick of understatement, by whatever name it might go, was a form of speech to which the Greek mind,

hating excess as it did, naturally tended. And so, for that matter, did and does the mind of the primitive savage. It was a favorite and most effective device of Anglo-Saxon poetry. . . ."[32] It seems reasonable to conclude further that understatement is directly related to intimate contact with primitive nature; and thus the ironic mode finds a natural home with Birney in Canada, where the uncaring environment deflates man's ambitious concerns. In Birney, moreover, the use of understatement is not a simple tool for satirizing man, but rather one way of dealing with a nature that must be defied as well as deified.

The first witness called by the Court is Captain Vancouver, who first discovered the inlet on which the city was founded. Birney gives him the speech of the poetry current in the Captain's time, which Frank Davey describes as "iambic pentameter couplets suitable to the rationalism of a late eighteenth-century gentleman."[33] The Captain is well-armed with modest rhetorical wit for the defusing of Legion's enthusiasm. But finally his shallow tone calls his own weight of "evidence" into question.

The Captain's use of understatement is clearly his prime satirical value. The Minister interrupts, for instance, to ask how the Captain knew from the Indians' eyes that they were the first whites to land in the region. Vancouver replies with scathing simplicity, "I saw no glint of terror in their glance" (*T*. p. 7). For some reason Birney cut this

section in the later version, but the Captain is given another chance to accomplish the same purpose. Legion proudly bestows upon him the label "Vancouverite," which Vancouver himself hastily denies in astonishment, "No!" (*D*. p. 170). As for the fame of discovery, he modestly disclaims responsibility:

> Did I begin it? Faith, it was by chance.
> My orders were to chart the northwest main
> And find if any strait led home again.
> . . . . . .
> Bemused with this I never, more's the pity,
> Discerned along those shaggy cliffs a city.
> (*T*. p. 8)

The Captain's modesty implicates his whole race in his own self-effacement. Relating his encounter with the Salish chief (next to be called to testify), Vancouver deflates his role with an ironic use of the classical model:

> Their chief sat like Apollo bronzed, yet looked,
> Poor soul, on me as if I were the god.
> It seems his race are mostly under sod.
> (*T*. p. 9)

Though his ironic simile prepares the way for the Chief's more noble defense, it is difficult to put much stock in the Captain. What the Minister calls the "decorous" use of Apollo, combined with the formal diction, meter and rhyme, all put a cooling gloss on the seriousness of the issue. Vancouver's testimony is perfect as a foil to Legion's historical illusions, yet his language, like Legion's, is limited in a technical sense.

When finally the captain is asked for his opinion of the city's fate, he answers with characteristic pre-Romantic

pastoralism. Of the city he never intended to found, he concludes,

> Tis big as my old London, and as dun,
> As planless, not so plaguey, but less fun.
> I rather liked the sweep of fir and cedar.
> Your city, sir--I cant think why I'd need her.
> (*T*. p. 10)

Birney follows this testimony with a speech by Powers which simultaneously gives a taint of escapism to the Captain's position, and absolves him of guilt for the city named for him. In short, his importance is practically disregarded:

> The Future then need ask the nimble Captain 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.
> (*T*. p. 10)

But what does become more significant in retrospect is the similarity of the Captain's attitude to that of Birney himself. Through the persona Birney is mocking his own Romanticism, his well-known personal preference for "fir and cedar" over the urban wilderness. He has also detached himself from his own sometimes facile satiric method. The rhetorical wit which Vancouver shares with Birney has the ambiguous nature of sharp accuracy with a corresponding loss of power. In this way, Birney at the end of the play has precisely defined and skewered every aspect of the modern city; and whether he, like Vancouver, should then be allowed to sail freely away is a matter requiring further evidence.

The characters who offer the most substantial arguments against the city are the Salish Chief and Professor E. O.

Seen. Both are treated kindly by Powers, for their testimony works as direct satire against Legion. Birney, too, is sympathetic to their speeches, which focus respectively on survival methods in a culture of natural harmony, and on a more scientific approach to the life of the earth in geologic time. The language appropriate to each is allowed to work, therefore, in fairly straightforward fashion.

The Chief, "who eulogizes the freedom and simplicity of native life, speaks in a highly rhetorical free verse which tends to echo years of oration in tribal council," to Davey's ears.[34] The oral tradition has always been close to Birney's heart, from his early reliance on Anglo-Saxon styles, through his increasing skill in mimicking vernacular and dialect, to the modern, Concrete idiom which treats sound as substantial content in itself. A language grounded in oral delivery has the inherent advantage of vivid imagery; which stems on the one hand from a need to reach the imagination immediately and directly with the flowing passage of sound; and on the other hand, from a cultural lifestyle more vitally rooted in the palpable facts of daily survival in nature.

The close living contact with nature brings to the language a fusion of human and natural terms in frequent animistic metaphor--a favorite device of Birney's own poetry. In fact, Birney himself has "borrowed" some of the Chief's actual imagery for use in a later poem on the topic of Vancouver's history, "the shapers: vancouver." The following

stanzas have been extracted image by image from a speech by the Chief, with only slight alterations:

> with saw of flame
> vice of thong
> jade axe
> the first builders contrived their truce
> with sea and hill
>
> out of high cedar slid the longboats
> out of sweet wood the windsilvered homes
> set tight against the rain's thin fingers
> a prose for endurance[35]

The last line, added later, has relevance here as a comment on the survival value of the primitive world-view which the metaphorical language reflects. The effect of such efficient concentration of meaning is understatement.

The Chief's speeches are simple, direct, and factual, even while implying a philosophy of survival. They offer a natural contrast to Legion's empty clichés exhorting the artificial values of Western society. The Chief explains the making of baskets:

> Red roots and yellow reeds entwined themselves within
> our women's hands, coiled to those baskets dancing
> with the grey wave's pattern or the wings
> of dragonflies you keep in the great cities now
> within glass boxes. Now they are art, white man's tabu,
> but once they held sweet water.
>
> (*T.* p. 13)

Legion crassly retorts, "Give me an aluminum pressure-cooker any time." The Chief's speech is longer, but his position is understated in a rhetorical sense, in dealing with facts instead of asserting a personal bias. Again, the Salish village was a model of harmony:

> We kept no men as warriors, we held no state on others.
> Each in his village had his work, and all made certain
> all
> were fed.

Legion shows only his prejudice in the stock response,

> A village fit only for stone axes--
> No state, no money, and--
> . . . . . .
> It's taxes build a city, make a nation in the end.
> (*T.* p. 16)

Such a bias is typical, and ironically true in its own way, but here it is exposed for the narrow limits of its vision. The Salish view is more imaginative, in its marriage of myth to fact. The mythological approach to central problems of survival describes Birney's own artistic methodology, especially as seen in this play. Faith in the favorable endurance of the human spirit (though secular rather than supernatural) forms the core of Birney's continual grasp of meaningful human survival.

But Birney backs off slightly from full support of the Salish position by editing out, in the later *Damnation,* the explicit discussion of military defense. He must have realized that as admirable as the Salish culture was, it is not a completely adequate alternative to the facts of the modern world. This unresolved conflict between ideals and reality makes up an important part of the play's whole ironic dimension. Birney is forced by his own ideals to stand fully behind the Salish Chief; but in doing so he is set at odds with his twentieth-century self, with his ultimate approach in the play to a more viable sense of human spirit in the

context of the modern community.

E. O. Seen, a U.B.C. professor of geology facetiously named after the prehistoric epoch, follows the Chief to the witness stand. His message, like that of the previous witness, penetrates to the heart of the issue at hand; and as Powers urges him on, he appears to speak almost totally for Birney. His testimony forms a kind of earth-epic, whose hero is the "geo-logic" (*T.* p. 23) of cosmic time, delivered in the Anglo-Saxon style. But Birney adds an ironic touch to this character's contribution, despite the seemingly clear-cut nature of his message.

The use of the Anglo-Saxon alliterative measure recalls, first of all, Birney's poetic roots. The thrust of the argument is also familiar to Birney in his early work, with occasional lines ringing sharp echoes. The "Prof" observes, "Though life leap to Mars it is lost in this fury," (*T.* p. 25) which recalls the earlier "Remarks for the Part of Death": "Did you think you could lose me on Mars?"[36] Birney's increasing concern with the central theme of the earth's mortality, so humbling to proud man, expands the treatment to many more poems after *Trial of a City*. Especially anticipated are the intimations of apocalypse in "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth" (1964), "The Mammoth Corridors" (1965), and "what's so big about GREEN?" (1973). Again, "the shapers: vancouver" borrows its first stanza from E. O. Seen's thesis, indicating Birney's thematic

support.

The Anglo-Saxon mode is meaningful not just in terms of technical comparison: the tradition from which it sprang is a source of ecological, historical, moral and metaphysical relationships crucial to the use of Seen's language by Birney. The Anglo-Saxon metric, of course, contributes to the theme of the earth's aging simply by being the oldest English form, one which has survived centuries essentially intact. On a deeper level, the language is rooted in a more primitive conception of experience, and, like the speech of the Salish, is consequently filled with "frequent and varied metaphors."[37] Informed with the primitive freedom of the imagination, science and history return to myth:

> Here incubus ice arcs over all,
> presses the shore's bones into the seabed,
> licks out fjords, levels the lean peaks
> and glittering, humps over the globe's round head.
> (*T.* p. 24)

But unlike the Salish view, the Anglo-Saxon spirit is colder, the vision grayer, a natural outgrowth of harsher, more threatening surroundings. This more negative emphasis describes the darker side of Birney's nature. Davey characterizes its embodiment in Seen's stark unflinching prophecies: "Given the overwhelmingly elegaic tone of extant Anglo-Saxon verse, these are a brilliant choice to convey the grim message the scientist must inevitably read from the indifferent rock."[38] (One is again reminded of "David.") It is difficult to pinpoint any one cause for such pessimism, whether

in climate and geography, in imagined spirit behind those natural forces, or in social and historical circumstances. Certainly all of these factors had a combined impact on the Old English mind, as they have even today on the modern Canadian sensibility.

Northrop Frye has written extensively on the "natural" connection between Anglo-Saxon and Canadian verse. The link is essential to Birney's use of the poetic form for the theme of survival in *Trial of a City*, as it was also in "David" and other earlier poems. Although Canada as a society is obviously more highly sophisticated than the semi-tribal Anglo-Saxon way of life, this difference is balanced by a corresponding increase in the relative vastness of the "hostile" geographic element; and the challenge to the spirit's survival persists. Canada "is a country in which nature makes a direct impression on the artist's mind, an impression of its primeval lawlessness and moral nihilism, its indifference to the supreme value placed on life within human society, its faceless, mindless unconsciousness, which fosters life without benevolence and destroys it without malice."[39] It may seem strange that a country sufficiently equipped with technology to overcome substantially the age-old hardships of physical survival could still be afflicted with such "moral nihilism." Yet Frye is able, with convincing evidence, to characterize the tenor of the mainstream of Canadian literature in this way. Perhaps only recently can

the benefits of technology be felt; but at the same time, its dehumanizing character only adds to the unfeeling vastness of nature still predominant in the Canadian vision.

Nature should not bear the whole blame for the human predicament. The Salish, it seems, were far better adjusted spiritually to a life similarly beset with problems of both a physical and military nature. The difference between the integral mythological faith of the West Coast tribes and the intimations of meaningless immortality held by the fictional geology professor and the real Anglo-Saxon scholar (Birney) in the halls of U.B.C. may possibly be traced to the Christianizing of the Norse tribes. Belief in redemption in the world to come could not help but throw a harsh light on an already difficult worldly struggle. The Old English poem *Sermo Lupi* exhibits the overbearing influence that the literature of Revelation had upon an already world-burdened soul: "In this impassioned homily Wulfstam places the demoralization of English society, afflicted by Viking invasions, within the dramatic context of general deterioration in a world hastening towards its preordained end."[40] The inevitability of doom is reflected in a similar way in Langland's role, as well as in Seen's and Powers', and in a large portion of Birney's whole body of poetry. But Birney's particular feeling is a post-Christian reaction to that more primitive sense of redemption. For the end result of such religious doctrine is a disillusionment with both the

transcendent gleam of salvation, and the comforts of the more organically relevant, mythological world-view which it replaced. Birney, for instance, is left with the finite optimism contained wholly within man, with the bare fact of life itself in a universe lacking God or gods. Mythology, and true faith, consists for Birney in poetic revelation: "What Sun brings after is Sun's business only" (*T*. p. 25).

The scientific objectivity of the geologist's speech is still another variation of understatement. Its subordination of human value to higher, more lasting natural truth is perhaps Birney's most powerful presentation against Vancouver's survival. But however close to his conscious belief, this inevitable apocalypse (as he makes evident in "November Walk") is met with equal force by a deeper personal conviction that man must still live while he can. So E. O. Seen's flawless position must be undercut in some way, as Birney asserts his own positivism. The result is once more a type of self-parody, to be found here in the excessively archaic and moralistic language itself, from which Birney nimbly moves on.

As a means of balancing his own view of nature, then, Birney undercuts his own representatives. In an elementary sense, they balance each other. The Chief is a much more satisfactory asset to the native position than his respectful but aloof white visitor, Captain Vancouver. In turn, E. O. Seen offers an irrefutable supplement to the Chief's more

subjective faith in the powers of nature. According to Davey, Birney moves even closer by 1965, in "The Mammoth Corridors," to Seen's position in relation to a more ideal conception of nature (such as that held by Captain Vancouver). As Davey sees it, "Once the land was to Birney synonymous with nature; now, in his growing pessimism, he appears emotionally convinced of E. O. Seen's realistic view of the planet as being at the mercy of cosmic fate."[41] What Davey does not appreciate in its true proportion is Birney's increasing freedom in ironic method, even from his most bitter insights. In *Trial of a City*, despite the frightening spectre of inevitable doom, made as convincing as possible with the oldest and most basic forms of the English language, Birney still escapes complete submergence in this yet distant view.

By way of final reaction to Seen's dominant truths, Birney deftly steps in to soften the blow to the reader. He has the professor sent off to the wrong exit, to be surprised by a death ironically closer than even he foresaw. However, having thus highlighted both the professor's own mortality and the undesirability of his nihilism, Birney yanks him back just in time. The reader is left, then, both with the import and the immediacy of a future oblivion, and with a compassionate perspective necessary to live within that knowledge.

Birney's handling of his first three witnesses shows where the real power lies in this play--in the unencumbered hands of its author. His attitude toward the problems of man's urban existence is not easily categorized; in fact it is best seen as beyond all possible categories, save that of the transcendental ironist. The detachment of which he is capable is all the more striking considering the very personal nature of the themes and forms being handled. For Birney, as Raymond Immerwahr says of Schlegel, "life is an ironic play, a chaos of incongruity and paradox. Where the poet chooses to remain completely hidden behind his own creation he must still project the irony of life and human nature into his own poetic world."[42] There is a curious balance in *Trial of a City* between authorial support of and detachment from each position; and where the witnesses are very real representatives of Birney's own self, the problem becomes more acute. This Romantic Irony, as in Schlegel, has a dual nature consisting of subjective and objective aspects: "we may legitimately term this irony objective in so far as it is expressed in the portrayal of an ironic world, and we may term it subjective when the poet, however subtly, communicates to us an ironic attitude toward his own artistic creation."[43] Birney's objective irony finds its strength and its frustration in perfect balance. Unable to favor one side or the other in the archetypal conflict between man and the universe, he turns his irony inward to

leave his whole work of art in limbo, so that he and his reader may be saved from the limitations of any finite conclusion, or any binding judgment.

The Witnesses: Ironic Overstatement

With the final three witnesses of the play, Birney turns to the techniques of caricature and overstatement. The arguments are still thrust against the city; but now they speak for man against man's own evils, rather than for nature against man in general. The issue comes to a social context; and history, myth, and science give way to the more immediately relevant concerns of man in communal relation to man. All three of the final witnesses are spokesmen for the common man, and Legion is once again the prime target as false counsel. The roles of these three, then, are vitally important to Birney's main theme; and yet, they are all clearly inferior to the poet himself. They are directly limited by caricature and by overstated language, by their own extreme satirical positions. Here lies Birney's true irony: that in proportion to each character's contribution to the objective irony (or satire at Legion's expense), the opinion is undercut from behind by Powers, himself focussing on the limits of language, ultimately a product of Birney's subjective detachment from the whole fabric of the play. There remains a question of the degree to which that ultimate ironic detachment on Birney's part is consciously contrived.

Objectively his last resort is belief in a common life spirit, opposed to both commercialism and fatalism. He finds that he must favor individual human reality against these general forces, but also accept the limited language by which that faith is expressed. In this conclusion is an obvious dilemma for Birney, to which he submits and which he transcends, simultaneously, as his ultimate faith resides in the work itself.

The figure of Gassy Jack, after whom the skidrow section of Vancouver ("Gastown") took its name and inspiration, is defined as a character by his purely colloquial dialect and personality. More evasive even than Captain Vancouver, his speeches are long-winded, irrelevant to the lines of questioning, and inescapably charming. His value as a witness lies not, as in the previous testimony, in the substance of his arguments, but in his social vitality.

After five pages of anecdotal digressions, Jack is finally brought back to the point of discussion, which is, Legion reminds him, "the fate of a city!" (*T.* p. 31). Jack's provincial reply shows the obvious limitations of the complacency of a bygone era, and its unabashed perspective is consonant with Captain Vancouver's underlying escapist sensibility. In honesty and relative directness, he observes,

> But it seems to me, why all the worry? Big ports, why they're a dime a dozen; when a sailor's young a port's a place to get drunk and make love in, and

> then to set sail out of, fast. When he's old and tired of the sea, what he wants is a place like old Gastown, a place that's, well, small, with clean water around it yet, and great thumpin trees, and deer wanderin in at night. Or even supposin he's set on a city, as I say, I dont like violence. Supposin now you get Mr. Powers to agree to move all your friends out, the folks you want to keep, scatter em up the coast maybe, startin new places? You and him splice hands on it. And let the rest go down to Davy Jones.

His point of view is curiously ambiguous. It is hard not to sympathize with the romantic love of freedom within society that Jack represents; but the final implications of its cliquish discrimination are unacceptable.

When pressed to resolve this dilemma expressed by Powers, "O Judgment Deighton, whom would you sheep from goats?" Jack's characteristic reply carries far-reaching satirical impact within its digressive drift:

> If it were me I'd just ship out the pretty girls (them that work spry and help a man), and the folk that really laugh and have fun; the rest dont matter. There's an awful lot of hippycrites in cities, you know, mates--card-sharps and slick traders and land-sharks and psalm-singers. I never liked most preachers, for example, and it puts me in mind of a story. You genm'n ever hear the one about the missionary and the bosn's girl? Seems they were shipwrecked together, see, and--

This speech comes to the point of Birney's own objective aims against the urban "hippycrites" represented by Legion. But the tangential eccentricity of the personal style makes it less fully convincing. When Jack finally exits reluctantly, Powers appropriately observes, "There goes the very gas the city swelled from" (*T.* p. 32). Birney reinforces his burlesque through caricature in this way; Jack is fully

exposed as yet another version of substantial satire in self-confined form. In this respect he, too, reflects the artist's own sense of self-parody.

Within Jack's free-ranging personal charm is an inherent counterbalance to the characters which follow, "Long Will" Langland and Mrs. Anyone. His anti-clerical bias has an ironic effect against the missionary spirit of the author of *Piers Plowman;* while the preference for "his own relatively healthy vulgarity and vice"[44] runs counter to the more conservative domestic morality of the housewife. At the same time, his essential humanness, in contrast to Legion's artificial sloganneering mentality, works in support of that deeper quality common to both Langland and Anyone. Birney additionally draws the contrast between this living spirit and the outdated verse of the Captain, the lost mythology of the Salish culture, and the archaic, death-bound revelations of Seen. These presentations were all, in effect, "Remarks for the part of Death," as it looms over the modern city. The historical character of Gassy Jack, on the other hand, is nearly allowed to escape in *Damnation* through the "live" anteroom (*D.* p. 195), in direct reversal of Seen's wrong exit. Langland, whose reforming spirit, manifest in the power of poetry, is still crucially relevant to the social ills of today, "enjoys a form of life as potent as, let us say, Mr. Deighton's," (*T.* p. 33) according to the Minister of History, who should know. Powers concurs, affirming

Langland's living presence in Vancouver: "He walks her streets and straits unseen each day." And Mrs. Anyone, finally, makes a cameo appearance for the truly living folk of the human community.

The entrance of William Langland to the play comes closest to active participation by Birney himself. The primary link is the role of the poet, which both distances the seer from his surroundings, and brings to full expression the passionately felt spiritual needs of the "field full of folk."[45] The symbolic ideal of the plowman central to Langland's poem is finally adapted by Birney to the archetypal housewife, but is also connected to the downtrodden of the cities, represented by Gassy Jack. *Piers Plowman* may be seen as a rough model for Birney's play, especially considering his professional familiarity with the original literature and its social context. The continuous humanitarian message is clear, whether in Birney's post-Marxist terms or in the Christian idiom: "the plowman is . . . especially in the fourteenth century, the figure of the poor and the exploited. The true peasant is the symbol of Christ and all that he implies--the salvation and the perfection of man."[46] The change in this theme that occurs in the secular treatment by Birney detracts somewhat from the full power of the original work. But his presentation of Langland minimizes the orthodoxy of belief in what actually is a proper concentration on the social, rather than the formally clerical, aspect of the

Christian ideal. *Piers* is truly a more primitive and democratic treatment of Christian values than its rhetorical framework may imply. And so Gassy Jack's aversion to "preachers" does not seriously damage Langland's role, but only gives it a necessary "plowman's" perspective. The rambling, almost ranting, visionary chant is thus almost totally an expression of Birney's own views; but it is slightly undercut by its own self-indulgent negativism, leaving the last word to the more modest housewife.

Piers Plowman is a suitable prototype for Birney's purposes in its redeeming humanitarian spirit within an apocalyptic framework. Again, the Christian element of the poem may be interpreted in its older, universal sense applicable as well to the modern human condition. Likewise, the fact of impending apocalypse serves equally well as a moral revelation; whether it implies the salvation of man in God's new reign on earth, or merely dampens man's false self-importance. Morton Bloomfield sees *Piers* in this revelatory sense, in his introduction:

> *Piers Plowman* is concerned with the subject of Christian perfection rather than with salvation. The former is the creation of the monastic tradition and is the older and more social Christian world view. This tradition was still alive in the fourteenth century and in England. . . . It finds its natural expression in the apocalyptic frame of mind and in corresponding literary forms. *Piers Plowman* can be best understood as an apocalypse that reflects this older Christian tradition.[47]

That basic humanitarianism in the realization of Christ's teachings in the earthly life is revived throughout Birney's

work as an agnostic humanism. The specific social spirit which he sees as a link between the spirit of both philosophies is found to be akin to pure communism, especially in the primitive sense of classless brotherhood. Birney in his study of *Piers* observes, "the religious exaltation of the role of the peasant which we find in *Piers Plowman* . . . was really an adaptation to peasant thought of the primitive communism found in the teachings of Christ."[48] In *Trial of a City*, one finds the expression of Birney's particular blend of these principles; in which there is neither God nor State to dominate the human spirit; in which man stands alone, together, to face the threatening void.

Birney remarks in his dissertation on the subject of Langland's irony, which comes close to his own: "His irony is either the proverbial and very simple but pointed understatement, . . . or it is allegory become, for the moment, subtle or even fiercely comic. The richest profundity of his fable is the search for Truth."[49] Examples of irony are therefore to be found in Langland as character, too, as he embodies an artistic quest of a sort for a means of salvation.

Will's wholesale social criticism has for its ultimate motivation a desire to see love, truth, and justice established in practice on earth, with the alternative of eternal damnation. His last speech finds the spiritual core of Vancouver's deserved doom, with its one possible hope for reprieve:

> 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 . . .
> (*T.* p. 40)

A gentle irony is found in such figures of speech as "lust of peace" and in the alliterative ease of expression; and Langland also makes clear Birney's central ironic theme--that the damnation does not come merely from an external God, but from the source of the allegorization itself as well as the source of evil, within man's own heart. It is there that *Piers* contains its ultimate hope for love and justice,[50] and there also that Birney finds hope. For "Fundamentally *Piers Plowman* is about social regeneration";[51] Birney's play also is concerned not only with love and justice as ideals, but with their realization.

Effective as his satire is, however, Langland must, like the other witnesses and like Birney himself, realize a degree of self-limitation inherent in the very process of detachment. The most subtle barb at Legion's expense comes as a pun on his name, in the following visionary catalogue delivered by Long Will:

> Then I looked eastward, saw a legion more
> of harried eyes hurrying down the hill for wages,
> makers of brassieres, business cards and bowling pins,
> mild folk or merciless, maidens clean and clabbered.
> (*T.* p. 35)

But such an all-encompassing vision gathers even the "mild folk" of the common housewife variety into the same "legion," all subject to doom. This indiscriminate enthusiasm, again, is both the strength and the limitation of Langland's artistic personality. Ultimately it works for Birney, just as *Piers Plowman* itself is "a great poem embodying his craving for Christian perfection and evincing a sense of apocalyptic urgency."[52] But it cannot work without a corresponding sense of ambiguity.

Langland is clearly superior to Legion in both satirical method and self-perspective. But Powers is given the keenest perception, which is really a subtle undercutting on Birney's part. Powers had already noticed the rambling style of Langland's unending condemnation, with such comments as "Please continue, Mr. Longlast. You were about to descry the wastern view," and "Mr. Alackland? North now?" (*T.* p. 36). His final parody of Langland comes with the mildly derisive name, "Master Wail," (*T.* p. 40) and here, as before, the jokes serve to give at least a minimal distance to the genuinely serious role of the impassioned seer.

In terms of *Trial of a City* as a whole, the city is damned on the one hand and redeemed on the other, with both positions substantiated with factual evidence and stylistic support. In its dual nature the play reflects the apocalyptic traditon of Christian literature from which *Piers* arose:

> The monastic and indeed the Christian view of man is ambiguous in its polarity; for if the world is contemptible as an evil temptation and as a transitory state, it is also admirable as the work of the Creator. Man is tarnished and stained, but underneath is the image of God, which can be uncovered.[53]

As if this fundamental but structurally objective irony were not enough, Birney's use of it carries a further subjective dimension caused by the deletion of God. The world (or city) on the one hand is "contemptible" and "transitory," but on the other is "admirable" by virtue of the endurance of its living humanity.

The ending of Birney's play gives it the quality of what Frye calls "the art of the analogy of innocence," which "is largely concerned with an attempt to present the desirable in human, familiar, attainable, and morally allowable terms."[54] The poetic speech of Mrs. Anyone, though sentimental and homely in a way, comes closest to an unpretentious, straightforward presentation of positive values. Her language reflects some of Birney's own shortcomings as a poet and playwright, as he cannot be wholly detached from her crucial role. Yet even in the context of the play itself, she offers a relatively convincing solution.

Mrs. Anyone, as a symbolic heroine, must denounce and dispose of the obstructing *alazon* Legion, a task highlighted in *Damnation* with added ritual emphasis. She offers a final summary satire and liquidates him with one magic spell:

> Pots and pans and Chamber of Commerce,
> Roosters, boosters, chisel and cheese-cake--
> SHOOO!
>
> (*D.* p. 208)

This witch-like function is archetypal, as Frye observes, "Comedy often includes a scapegoat ritual of expulsion which gets rid of some irreconcilable character."[55] But ironically, Mrs. Anyone as an average housewife is implicated in the very way of life Legion claims to represent, and which she supposedly banishes. The difference is indicated by the respective language of the two, however. Legion himself mistakes the lady's position as an aid to his own. He even congratulates her,

> Why listen, lady, you're practically a poet, I can see.
> If you can keep this up and cover all the region
> We'll have the Tourist Bureau print a million copies
> They'll never damn us then or my name isnt Legion.
> (*T.* p. 44)

Legion mistakes her fundamental spirit of human survival for his empty commercial interests. She expresses the true integrity of Vancouver in her boundless affirmation, not in self-serving slogans. She can answer him in proud defiance,

> Your name isn't Legion--mine is.
> . . . . . .
> And only in your absence can I speak.

Though perhaps overly artificial and naive, her own verses have the advantage of real faith and honesty. These redeeming qualities comprise an antidote necessary to replace the absurdities of Legion's rhymes, and to give more substance, if still flawed, to the city's human character.

Frye draws a distinction between an ironic comedy and a more straightforward type, with the following relation: "The more ironic the comedy, the more absurd the society, and an

absurd society may be condemned by, or at least contrasted with, a character that we may call the plain dealer, an outspoken advocate of a kind of moral norm who has the sympathy of the audience."[56] This basic character contrast accurately describes the confrontation of Legion and Anyone. Absurdity is replaced by honesty; but Birney does not stop with this objective formula. He adds the further ironic dimension even to the honest figure herself.

Mrs. Anyone's speeches tend to be, aesthetically considered, "painfully formal, pedantically complicated, or overtly rhetorical," according to Davey.[57] As evidence he quotes her first long speech, and his judgment seems to be accurate:

> Whether the record mutes me
> Or my child unloose me to sorrow,
> Whether the glaciers glide
> Or the sun scream down tomorrow--
> 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.
>
> (*T.* p. 42)

But Davey does not realize Birney's ironic intention in consciously making use of such overstatement. Powers immediately provides the necessary perspective, with his eironic retort,

> O pettaful lady, is this all your shell and
> shelter from the blast?
> The future hedonizes not these sinsualities

and Mrs. Anyone's allegorical powers are equalized. Her function is somewhat like that of a Chorus, which speaks eloquently in sympathy of natural and social spirit, but which cannot fully placate the gods. In the quick interplay of the dialogue which follows, however, she holds her own, disposing of the lesser personalities, and invoking a stubborn Greek humanism capable of standing up to the arbitrary dictates of cosmic fate.

In the process of disposing of "Mr. Pseudo-Legion," Mrs. Anyone likewise disarms the illusion of History. She acts in defiance of the order in the Court, futilely wielded by the Minister, who is only, she says, "Presiding, but you cannot interfere. You're only history" (*T.* p. 44). She may be acting for society's benefit as a *dea ex machina*, coming from the live audience onto the stage. But her "providential" entrance is justified by its truth-restoring function. She replaces the myth of ordered history, as well as the illusions of the ad-man, with a more universal human reality. The mythic structure within which she acts is the art itself, a form which for Birney speaks highest truth.

History, with the inevitable doom it implies, is counteracted with individual human faith in the regenerative power of time on a finite scale. The irreconcilable contrast between timeless death and living faith results in a

suspended judgment reflective of mortal fate. Marshall McLuhan expands the significance of Birney's device, which otherwise might be seen as too easy an escape: "It was Bertrand Russell who declared that the great discovery of the twentieth century was the technique of the suspended judgment."[58] Russell's remark presumably referred to processes of rational thought, which imply a freedom in intellectual detachment from commitments of a finite nature. McLuhan extends the technique to a social and cultural scale, where art is a vehicle of imaginative foresight. The balanced perspective provided in *Trial* serves the vital function of a kind of preventative prophecy.

Birney applies the value of the suspended judgment to the literal level of social improvement, just as *Piers Plowman* was written for a real moral purpose. But more primarily, Birney broadens the reader's awareness of his own situation in life; as foresight gives birth to the insight which bore it. This humbler purpose more realistically begins any public conception of truth, and it properly defines the limits of the play. The theme of hope within awareness of its denial forms the basis of Birney's art, which serves to enlighten, if not to improve directly, man's modern predicament.

The closing stichomythia between Powers and Mrs. Anyone may perhaps best be summarized with the following extract, which illustrate Birney's eternal detente:

POW--Me? Ho! I'm allwise just beyond your reach--
and yet I hold you.
WOM--But ever I am loosed by hope.
POW--And lost, in this unhopey world.
WOM--No. My mind's unconquered.
. . . . . .
By all the past we know our freedom is renewable
each moment.
POW--By all your past the Future has condoomed you.
. . . . . .
WOM--No! Never! I am mistress over you, my Master
Powers--The only future's what I make each hour.
. . . . . .
POW--But lady, lady, I threaten everthelease.
WOM--How could I know, without the threat of death,
I lived?
. . . . . .
It's my defiant fear keeps green my whirling world.
POW--Brave-O, my wise madmadam . . . Come, we'll lock
away, and mate again on Judgment Day.
WOM--Content--but I shall keep the key.
POW--Content--but I'll have the skeleton.
WOM--And I--a life.

(*T*. pp. 45-47)

Each character speaks irrefutable truth. The courtroom battle ends with Powers as an ironic anti-hero, as the champion of fate and holder of language's full powers, but with the heroine equally strong in her persistent faith. Birney's judgment must be suspended, indefinitely, and so the city once more struggles on. But now it lives with full connotations of its limits and powers, as a wider embodiment of the humanity living within. And Birney can stand behind a balanced vision, the poet and his art together forming a symbolic testament to the human capacity for ironic endurance.

FOOTNOTES

[1]*Trial of a City, Trial of a City and Other Verse* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1952), p. 1.

[2]*Damnation of Vancouver, Selected Poems 1940-1966* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966), p. 213.

[3]*Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), p. 163.

[4]Ibid., p. 147.

[5]Ibid., p. 166.

[6]Ibid., p. 147.

[7]Ibid., p. 168.

[8]Ibid., p. 178.

[9]Ibid., p. 164.

[10]Ibid., p. 172.

[11]Davey, pp. 97-98.

[12]*Trial*, p. 3 (hereafter noted as *T* in the text).

[13]*Damnation*, p. 163 (hereafter noted as *D* in the text).

[14]Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 172.

[15]Ibid., p. 172.

[16]Ibid., p. 148.

[17]Davey, p. 100.

[18]Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 155.

[19]Eichner, p. 72.

[20]Frye, "Letters in Canada, 1952," *Univ. of Toronto Quarterly*, 22 (1953), rpt. in Nesbitt, p. 102.

[21]Introduction to the 2nd ed., *Understanding Media* (New York: Signet, 1964), p. xi.

[22]Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 172.

[23]W. H. New, "Maker of Order, Prisoner of Dreams: The Poetry of Earle Birney," *Articulating West* (Toronto: new press, 1973), p. 263.

[24]"Tradition and the Individual Talent," (1917), rpt. in W. J. Bate, ed., *Criticism: The Major Texts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952), p. 525.

[25]New, p. 265.

[26]Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 169.

[27]New, p. 263.

[28]Nesbitt, p. 103.

[29]*Anatomy*, p. 277.

[30]*A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 225.

[31]"Critical Fragments," No. 42, in Peter Firchow, tr., *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 148.

[32]Sedgewick, pp. 7-8.

[33]Davey, p. 99.

[34]Ibid., p. 99.

[35]"the shapers: vancouver," *what's so big about green?* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973), n.p.

[36]"Remarks for the Part of Death," *Now is Time* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1945), p. 4.

[37]Palgrave, p. 108.

[38]Davey, p. 99.

[39]Frye, "The Narrative Tradition in English-Canadian Poetry," (1946), in *The Bush Garden*, p. 146.

[40]Peter Clemoes, *Rhythm and Cosmic Order in Old English Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), p. 21.

[41]Davey, p. 112.

[42]"The Subjectivity or Objectivity of Friedrich Schlegel's Poetic Irony," *Germanic Review*, 26 (October 1951), 183.

[43]Ibid., p. 191.

[44]Frye in Nesbitt, p. 102.

[45]William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, tr. Henry W. Wells (1935; rpt. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1959), p. 3.

[46]Morton Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 106-07.

[47]Ibid., p. vii.

[48]"Chaucer's Irony," II. 41.

[49]Ibid., II, 50.

[50]Bloomfield, p. 130.

[51]Ibid., p. 4.

[52]Ibid., p. 97.

[53]Ibid., p. 29.

[54]*Anatomy*, p. 157.

[55]Ibid., p. 165.

[56]Ibid., p. 176.

[57]Davey, pp. 100-01.

[58]McLuhan, p. 68.

CHAPTER IV

"NOVEMBER WALK NEAR FALSE CREEK MOUTH": COSMIC IRONY: CHAOS AND CREATION

> For irony everything becomes nothingness, but nothingness may be taken in several ways. The speculative nothingness is that which at every moment is vanishing for concretion, since it is itself the demand for the concrete, its [creative impulse]. The mystical nothingness which yet is as full of content as the silence of the night is eloquent for one who has ears to hear.
>
> --Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 275.

"November Walk Near False Creek Mouth"[1] (1963) represents a clear expansion of Birney's thematic vision and stylistic talents during the eleven-year span from *Trial of a City*. Having treated survival metaphorically in a physical context (in "David"), and dramatically in a social context (in *Trial*), the poet moves on to a more purely lyrical study of survival in the widest context conceivable. Nature has previously appeared as a personified, monolithic entity holding allegorical judgment on man; but now Birney presents a more comprehensive view. Nature shows a life of its own; more aloof than a mountain or archangel, its meaning is self-contained. As such, nature's independent status serves best as a model and complementary context for meaningful human life.

Birney's travels around the world between 1953 and 1963[2] led directly to most of the poems in *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* (1962) and *Near False Creek Mouth* (1964). Even his "November Walk" back in the local context of Vancouver reflects and contains a broader and deeper capacity for vision. The poem itself was, in effect, growing within Birney during his "*grand tour*"; and the resultant free-ranging irony characterizes Schlegel's ideal poem: "It should have traveled through all the three or four continents of humanity, not in order to round off the edges of individuality, but to broaden its vision and give its spirit more freedom and inner versatility; and thereby greater independence and self-sufficiency."[3] The value of an art strengthened in this way is in its demonstration of the improvement of personal, and by extension, human survival.

Birney has expanded the limits of both his outer and inner vision, as he realized man's exploitation of man and nature everywhere, along with the alienation faced by the itinerant visionary. His ironic aptitude was catalyzed especially by his own role as a privileged North American tourist--one whose concern about poverty and squalor was shadowed by what Birney felt as his own passive implication in the problems of "Third World" peoples. This deeply personal sense of irony surfaces in "November Walk" in the form of a cosmic alienation of the aging poet from the chaos of human and inhuman nature, but a form which leads to and

exhibits new creation.

The Salish Chief in *Trial of a City* speaks in a metaphorical manner which reveals his strengths and weaknesses in terms of survival: his world-view, partially shaped by his own subjective language, directly reflects his living relation to nature. Birney has developed this same particular kind of treatment of nature through language in "David." It is an essentially ironic relation the poet is handling, especially as he finds identity in his protean persona's continually incomplete striving for harmonious survival. In "November Walk" the precarious interplay between man and nature (or subject and object, for the poet) is envisioned on a scale earlier heard in the speech of E. O. Seen, professor of geology: a message close in both theme and form to that of articulate nature in "David." In all three works, as in the whole of Birney's poetry, man is warned of the limited survival value of historical human pride, while hope is found in the more creative, mythologized pride of the poetic craft.

Only an infinite irony such as Birney employs can fuse so perfectly the human necessities of pride and humility. The art itself represents such a fusion, for "the ironist, to be sure, is lighter than the world, but he still belongs to the world."[4] Survival in the physical world is insured, as it were, by the balanced reinforcement which ironic art provides for the psyche. More directly, the poet, enjoying

his own practical transcendence, adapts to his linguistic environment. He succumbs willingly to his own immediate form, thereby becoming part of a metaphor shared by his art, a reconstructed concrete model for survival.

Once again the critical judgment of Birney is incomplete, especially in Frank Davey's study, the major single published treatment to date. Davey acknowledges Birney's primary satire, which in "November Walk" recalls *Trial;* both are "about the destruction of Vancouver."[5] Davey also has made note of Birney's equivocal ending in the first work, but without full appreciation of the conscious handling of form. As Birney's personal sense of crisis widens, Davey's judgment narrows, and he observes, "By the time of the writing of 'November Walk,' . . . Birney's humanism has failed and his pessimism about man's future grown complete."[6] Davey goes on to substantiate an even more direct statement: "'November Walk' is the poem in which this optimistic humanism dies. The death is evident in the verbs of the poem, in how the old verbs of violence, toil, and aspiration have been replaced by verbs of stasis and slow motion."[7] Davey's observation has only limited truth; it is an evaluation which fails to take account of Birney's overriding irony and misses the poem's more central intention. Birney yet posits behind his wasteland a personal life force more vital than the lingering wreckage of human history, and more meaningful than the abstract throbbings of sea and star.

In effect, Davey neglects to appreciate Birney's distance from the poetic persona in "November Walk." His detailed examination is correct when conducted within the forest of words, yet he acknowledges no forest. Davey finds only that

> the poem is overwhelmingly descriptive, and contains little action, motion, or excitement. It possesses the same langour that Birney finds culpable in the people of the poem, but, while this congruence of mood may be theoretically desirable, the result is weak art. The poem's three most frequent verbs are *to be*, *to sit*, and *to wait*. The remainder are dominated by *walk*, *come*, *lie*, *stray*, *stare*, *crawl*, *wander*, *cling*, *slip*, and *nudge*--not an energetic group. Moved by these, "November Walk" is a poem of regret and resignation by a poet ostensibly as dejected and moribund as his fellow citizens.[8]

But Birney is clearly *more* "dejected and moribund" than his "fellow citizens"; for he is a poetic tourist alienated even from his own society. In realizing his plight, relating it to the situation of mankind in a hostile world and an alien universe, and extending it to its physical and psychological limits, however, Birney seeks to overcome it. Though he finds himself in a situation much like the narrator of "David," the poet has an advantage in the creative power of detachment. He may even portray his own real suffering, but it fills an aesthetic form which simultaneously saves him from it. Peter C. Noel-Bentley's view of Birney's artistic progress penetrates deeper than Davey's in its respect for this primarily subjective theme: "instead of the struggle being against an epic and physical force symbolized by nature, the struggle is to face reality, to accept responsibility for

the state of things, and then personally to do something about it."[9] Birney takes recourse to his art, which by growing from and mimicking universal paradox, shows man how to live with it.

"David" and *Trial of a City* took care of most of Birney's concern with naming obstructions to human survival. Both contained objective ironies focusing on external nature and "civilized" folly, but pointing deeper. "November Walk" still applies Birney's ever-needful satire on a worldly level, but now extends much further his subjective irony, which approaches the meeting of nature, man, and language.

In essence, Davey's criticism is valid to a point, but limited by its appeal to traditional values found in straightforward narrative, epic, or passionate lyric modes. When he finds no positive commitment by Birney to any fixed faith in his own society, in human civilization in general, nor indeed in any more metaphysical notion of progressive life, Davey finds no vocal power:

> Birney makes no myth take root in his measures, not even his myth of indifferent but dynamic nature. With the gods dying, . . . his tenacious optimism, and its likely corollary, his vigour and sureness of language, are totally lacking.[10]

This value judgment is suspect in its own terminology, suggesting that Birney's former beliefs lay in his own mythical "gods." Actually "November Walk" is perhaps the closest poem yet to Birney's "true voice of feeling," allowing for some ironic exaggeration of his own predicament. And even

in this case, the positive poetic feeling can only be found behind the actual "voice" of the lines. The kind of value Davey looks for is itself mythical in most of Birney's work, and usually subjected as such to a pervasive ironic attack. Birney's highly individualized brand of "optimistic humanism" is ironic to the core, leading not only through satire to a universal disorientation, but through personal and aesthetic irony to an even more complete "self-disorientation."[11] What serious commitment remains in his work by the writing of "November Walk" is, by Kierkegaard's definition of irony, "the seriousness with nothingness insofar as it is not the seriousness with something."[12] Schlegel agrees, with a more positive but equally transcendental view: "Irony is, as it were, the demonstration of infinity, of universality, of the feeling for the universe."[13] And in the terms most relevant to Birney's exercise of art in the face of the barest survival, Kierkegaard qualifies the dual character of irony in confronting an ambiguous cosmos: "Irony is the infinitely delicate play with nothingness."[14]

No doubt Birney found in his world travels that the prospect of saving the world in any direct fashion was more and more remote, even impossible. It is understandable that the poet would desire even more to channel his hopes for mankind into a symbolic world, perhaps with the idea of indirect influence, certainly with the idea of interpersonal enlightenment. But obviously the resulting art would not

represent a utopia. It must reflect both the bleak dilemmas of the cold war world, and the ongoing creative life force.

The logic that is missing from the contradictions and paradoxes of the world and the cosmos at large is found only in the return to the microcosm. Birney's poem as a whole forms a meaningful *logos*, in a spirit central to his modern Romanticism. Morse Peckham finds that "the logic of Romanticism is that contradictions must be included in a single orientation, but without pseudo-reconciliations."[15] Birney's metaphorical manipulation of myth, history and objective fact neutralizes their respective, limited values. He aims to forge, by a kind of alchemical synthesis, a higher value, a stronger faith, a truer myth--in short, a new identity. The price of such a recreation of the self is the initial estrangement from both self and cultural matrix. As Peckham explains,

> Hence the social alienation which accompanies the cosmic isolation, or loss of relatedness to the perceived world. The first step at reconstituting value, then, is to strip bare the self, or more accurately, to invent the self, to conceptualize the sense of identity. To survive, one asserts pure identity as the basic datum . . . to assert the self as real and the world as a symbol of . . . the self, and order and value as projected upon the world by the self.[16]

Of course the false projection of value has been satirized by Birney throughout his poetry. In "November Walk," however, he reaches the crisis of denying all value, and at the same time finds himself nevertheless compelled to project a new value outward. The mythic image finally approaches its

destined truth, in becoming simultaneously so universal and personal that the poetry must stand for the poet. And as in the previous works, the prime truth rests not in particular metaphorical images, but in the whole poem as a symbol. "November Walk" represents the creation of the new self out of the destruction of the old self. Rather than having old myths take "root in his measures," as Davey would suggest, Birney chooses instead a new, freer measure; which more in the manner of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, is a way of making things new, taking root in the wreckage of the old, exploded, measured myths.

It is only such a hidden glimmer of hope that has meaning for a future world. Birney gives his own poems a meaningful extension of value in their very character as "ends in themselves." He explains, in his introduction to *Selected Poems 1940-1966*,

> That I go on so stubbornly to publish my incantations, in a world which may not last long enough to read them, and has shown little need for them so far, might be construed as mere vanity, or again as proof that the outer me is as abnormally compulsive as the inner. I prefer to believe, rather, 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.[17]

The organizing metaphor of "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth" is that of a voice and its echo. The title itself suggests that the poem is an echo of False Creek's voice, which in turn only echoes the true voice of the sea.

The very essence of irony is that falsity is an echo of truth. Davey makes the understandable error of mistaking the echo of Birney's voice, though a close approximation, for the real thing--which is to say, he intuits no real voice at all. The poem is in effect a living echo of the poet's real misgivings, but an ironic chord which includes as well his feelings of an enduring life force. The metaphor is revealed on a thematic level as the cosmos and the society share a mutual organic impulse, which also grows in the poet's lyric rhythms. Birney is caught between a devilish society and the alien beauty of a proverbial "deep blue sea," but he makes the most of the predicament. Particularly fruitful is the common foundation of time, which governs universe, history, and walking consciousness with echoes of itself. Time is really a continuous, oscillating echo of the voice of eternity. On the most concrete level of the poem, the language itself, Birney exploits the organic character of time. Through open but steady rhythms, echoing negatives, and lyrical repetition of key sounds, words, and phrases, the poem forms an echo of evolving time, both self-negating and self-perpetuating. Finally, the visual image of the poem as a typographical entity is a "Concrete" echo of the private experience: particularly on the undulating left-hand margin, a graph of the shoreline walk itself.

The mission of Garbiel Powers was one of apocalyptic prophecy. His role is taken up anew by a more human and

personally poetic voice in "November Walk," as that mission becomes more immediately urgent in the cold war world of the early sixties. In fact Noel-Bentley sees the latter poem, not *Trial of a City*, as "the exemplar of the ambiguous warning-hope theme."[18] The ironic message is embodied in the poem as a whole, as well as in its separate images. Birney's consciousness of nuclear holocaust is reflected early in the sun (the earth's "burning father"), and in the lonely individuals "stranded as nations," who are forced into alienation from their still-doomed metropolis:

> . . . the refugees
> from the slow volcano
> the cratered rumbling sirening vents
> the ashen air the barren spilling
> compulsive rearing of glassy clif
> from city
> they come to the last innocent warmth
> and the fading
> before the unimaginable brightness

One notes as well in these metaphors a more constructive, because more immediate, criticism of the slow death that is taking place already: of the alienation caused by urban existence in general, manifested particularly in pollution, which takes the form of noise, smog, sewage, and high-rise construction.

Birney's form echoes his theme, just as his theme is an extension of form: they are fused perfectly in the emphasized lyrical fragments, which concretely echo the sea:

> *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

Here the connection is complete between *"nothing"* and everything, between "chaos" and creation, between the cosmos, the earth, man's works, and man himself; just as between the chaos of poetic theme and the creative order of its form.

The eternal duality takes living form as a universal tide, as an unchanging flux which permeates every phase of being, and every phase of the poem. This is

> *The beat beating is the soft cheek*
> *nudging of the sly shoving almost*
> *immortal ocean at work*
> *on the earth's liquidation*

Symbolically, the sea is only "almost" immortal. Deeper even than the death-beat of the beating sea,

> . . . down to the ocean's abyss
> and farther down through a thousand seas

lies the central image of ironic survival, fusing at once the levels of cosmic, earthly, and human life, in a unified, inherent paradox. This is

> . . . the dense unbeating black unapproachable
> heart of this world

which Birney not only approaches, but holds in his hands.

Noel-Bentley sees Birney's use of the sea primarily as a symbol for the past, which

> in one sense can be seen to be rejuvenating man's life. Or, as later uses of the sea indicate, time

> can become the consumer, the eater of what little is left of the history of man. . . . History, too, can rejuvenate man, or can be seen as the eater of man.[19]

There does not seem to be any direct evidence in the poem to support the distinction between early and "later uses of the sea." The real difference lies between the thematic use, which is as a destructive force throughout, and the formal use, which is most evident as the impelling force behind the lyricism. This juxtaposition is the basis of the poem's Romantic irony.

Birney's use of history in "November Walk," exploiting its mythic possibilities, echoes *Trial of a City*. The advance comes with the widening of scale, so that Legion's ritual sacrifice expands to the role of the entire contemporary world. The Office of the Future has been incorporated into all Time, which demands a sacrifice of the present to both past and future. Kierkegaard's view of this "evolution" of time as a whole is ironic: "The past shows it is still justified by demanding a sacrifice, the new by providing a sacrifice."[20] It recalls Powers' mission of negative prophecy, in turn echoing John the Baptist, looking back at a condemnable "actuality" in order to reveal and clear the way for necessary new possibility.[21]

Birney's revelation contains no Second Coming, except that of the cold "winds" to come after our *"last of warmth."* But still "the highest shelf of ever" is "washed by the curve of timeless returnings," which is redemption in its most absolute sense, the self-redemption of the cosmos.

Only man's art has the cyclical and organic capacity for such self-sufficiency, and self-justification. And it derives that capacity as both an external and internal model of the macrocosm.

In such an embodiment of eternal meaning, time is reduced to human history, which in turn is distilled into myth. The active agent of such a transformation is irony, which allows the poet and reader to extract truth from an illusory solution of images. As Kierkegaard comments,

> Insofar as irony should be so conventional as to accept a past, this past must then be of such a nature that irony can retain its freedom over it, continue to play its pranks on it. It was therefore the mythical aspect of history, saga and fairy-tale, which especially found grace in its eyes.[22]

What is concerned, for the moment, is the objective use of actual human history and mythology. But the irony which combines fact and fancy immediately departs from its own imaginative surfaces.

Birney relates in the beginning,

> I walk as the earth turns
> from its burning father

a primary mixture of simple description, scientific fact (which compares ironically with what we call "sunset"), pagan creation myth, and Christian personification. Soon after comes a "juxtaposition of England's heroic past with the unheroic present of Vancouver's very British English population; the juxtaposition is, of course, very ironic";[23]

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

The beat is the small slap slapping

The irony noticed by Noel-Bentley is further compounded by the natural metaphor, itself leading into more concrete organic harmony in the form of language more musical than the Old English measure.

Further examples elaborate what Noel-Bentley sees as "the ambiguity of the earth's turning 'from its burning father': . . . from God-Buddha-Thor, the mythic progenitor, and hence from the epic quality within man?"[24] If so, in answer to his question, it is a turning *to* the lyric quality whose mythic image is the music of language. The "epic" religious myth is meaningless in the present context. It is, unequivocally,

not this wrinkled triad of tourists
strayed off the trail from the rank zoo
peering away from irrelevant sea
seeking a starred sign for the bus-stop
They dangle plastic totems a kewpie
a Hong Kong puzzle for somebody's child
who waits to be worshipped
back on the prairie farm
. . . . . .
Nor for certain the gamey old gaffer
asleep on the beach like a local Buddha

nor for certain is the son of Thor "Carl *Thor*son" of Winnipeg.

Natural and human history and myth collide in the destruction of the past by the present. But that very

destruction is a kind of progressive creation, shared by sea and poet:

> Through piled backyards of the sculptor sea
> I climb over discarded hemlock saurians
> Medusae cedar-stumps muscled horsemen
> Tartars or Crees sandsunk forever
> and past the raw sawed butt
> telltale with brands
> of a buccaneered boom-log
> whisked away to a no-question mill

All life is similarly destined for the relentless mill of evolution; of which man here appears as both chief agent and eventual victim.

The final complexity of "November Walk," thematically speaking, is discovered by Noel-Bentley, who hints at its formal foundation:

> Whatever the narrator sees sends his mind to analogies that exist in the various myths of this earth. These myths are seen as one, but do not necessarily form a statement of unity. For they are also ironically contrasted with a modern reality. They do not form a damnation of modern man, either, for these myths are part of modern man, and he can use them to create new myths. A total ambiguity exists, which then reflects on every poem in the volume of *Near False Creek Mouth*.[25]

But the ambiguity is most satisfactorily resolved by letting irony take its full course, which Birney does. If any new myths may be created, and through them a meaningful future, the poet takes the task as his own. He only begins with history, and ends with new creation. Thus "at one moment historical actuality has absolute validity for irony, at the next moment none at all, for irony has itself assumed the momentous task of providing actuality."[26] The burden of such poetry is absolute responsibility for man's situation. Its

reward is absolute freedom; for its new myth is created from the chaos of the imagination, where "its actuality is sheer possibility."[27]

The historical relevance of Christ is metaphorically negated by Birney, in terms of past, present, and future. The mythical or symbolic value of Christ's self-sacrifice reaffirms highest truth, however, especially in an aesthetic sense. Birney as a truly "Romantic poet thus takes upon himself the role of Christ; he becomes Christ, and he is himself his own redeemer and the model for the redemption of mankind. Eventually this task of the artist is extended to every human being."[28] Even literally speaking, man in the nuclear age is preparing for his own self-sacrifice. But it is in that literal sense that any redeeming purpose is lacking. The irony of it is that man still "knows not what he does," in unconsciously following Christ's martyrdom. It is the poet's job to create such awareness, and with it, meaning. Human pride presents the chief obstacle, which must be overcome. Birney faces this problem personally and most effectively in "November Walk," where the basis of pride is utterly washed away, the search for external meaning fails, and yet the poem succeeds with an internally meaningful effect. Birney is thus a Romantic poet in the most implicit sense: "Professing an art which is 'eternally becoming' and never perfect, he knows that he is doomed to perpetual failure; but by the ironic admission of failure within the work

itself the failure is nullified."[29] His resignation to the necessary sacrifice required by cosmic time and universal life serves as a sign of humility, which brings grace.

Poetic humility is found throughout "November Walk" in that scarcely ironic "pretence of self-depressions" that shapes its theme. It is most evident in the finding of lyrical sense in the sound of the sea, and in Birney's giving of his own talents to the more abstract rhythms of time itself:

> *Slowly scarcely sensed the beat*
> *has been quickening now as the air*
> *from the whitened peaks is falling.*
> *faraway sliding pouring down*
> *through the higher canyons and over*
> *knolls and roofs to a oneway urgent*
> *procession of rhythms*

The real channel of communication represented by the lines of "November Walk" takes place behind the words, as an inner voice speaking to the reader's inner ear. Especially the italicized stanzas comprise what R. A. Brower has described as "The Figure of Sound": "In the inner ear we record all those nameless but wonderful modelings of the spoken word that take place under the pressure of feeling and that express it better than any words can do"; "the accumulation of like sounds," especially, becomes in the inner ear "particularly expressive sounds," with a subjectively felt "relationship of appropriateness" deeper than the onomatopoeia.[30] In "November Walk," as in most of Birney's Concrete poems which follow, the "figure of sound" takes advantage of

both a surface correspondence to theme and an inherent capacity of well-chosen words for musical self-expression. Thus it is no surprise that Birney's Concrete experiments grow directly out of the earlier experience of his "November Walk." The relationship is clear, as Mary Ellen Solt finds: "The concrete poem finds itself isolated in space to make a significance of its given materials as contemporary man finds himself isolated in space to make a significance of his life."[31]

In spite of history's greatest threat to survival, out of the chaos that is left of human reason, Birney keeps an unhindered faith in the process of creation. His ironic method brings about not only a universal exposure of folly and illusion, but the profoundest intuition that art is the only meaningful act of survival in a cosmos whose only redemption is creation itself. Birney's most personal and subjective irony remains in his view of the artist, as revealed in 1955 ("The Writer and the H-Bomb--Why Create?"):

> If he loses faith in the validity of art, it won't matter about H-Bombs. The act of artistic creation is itself the strongest blow he can deliver for survival, an assertion of his belief in a human future too wonderful to name.[32]

Here he reaffirms his original departure from the Trotskyist priority of political struggle before culture.[33] It is most interesting that Birney echoes Brower's description of the inner dimension of poetic sound, "nameless but wonderful." The "human future" is much like the primary sensibility of

the poet himself, then. Both are banished from any realization, or even imperfect naming, of Eden past or future. Birney is left with his readers in the only human position possible, *in medias res*, between the word and the wonder, between chaos and creation.

FOOTNOTES

[1]"November Walk Near False Creek Mouth," *Near False Creek Mouth* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1964), n.p.

[2]Robillard, p. 7.

[3]*Athenaeum Fragments*, No. 297, in Firchow, p. 204.

[4]Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony* (1841), tr. Lee M. Capel, rpt. (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 180.

[5]Davey, p. 103.

[6]Ibid., p. 104.

[7]Ibid., p. 109.

[8]Ibid., pp. 107-08.

[9]"A Study of the Poetry of Earle Birney," M.A. Thesis, Univ. of Toronto 1966, p. 66.

[10]Davey, p. 110.

[11]Morse Peckham, "Toward a Theory of Romanticism: II. Reconsiderations," *Studies in Romanticism*, I, 1 (Autumn 1961), 1-8.

[12]Kierkegaard, p. 287.

[13]Eichner, p. 72.

[14]Kierkegaard, p. 286.

[15]Peckham, p. 8.

[16]Ibid., p. 5.

[17]*Selected Poems*, p. xii.

[18]"A Study of the Poetry of Earle Birney," p. 126.

[19]Ibid., pp. 128-29.

[20]Kierkegaard, p. 277.

[21]Ibid., pp. 278-80.

[22]Ibid., p. 294.

[23]Noel-Bentley, "A Study," p. 128.

[24]Ibid., p. 128.

[25]Ibid., pp. 126-27.

[26]Kierkegaard, p. 296.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Peckham, p. 6.

[29]Eichner, p. 72.

[30]*The Fields of Light: An Experiment in Critical Reading* (1951; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 59, 74.

[31]*Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), p. 59.

[32]"The Writer and the H-Bomb--Why Create?" *Queen's Quarterly*, 62 (1955), 44.

[33]First noticeable in a noncommittal literary review, of *The New Realism* by Stephen Spender, in *Canadian Forum*, 19 (July 1939), 134.

CHAPTER V

"WHAT'S SO BIG ABOUT GREEN?":

ORGANIC RESPONSIBILITY: THE CONCRETE BLUEPRINT

> natural objects are . . . themselves only imitations, and . . . the arts do not simply imitate what they see but reascend to those principles from which Nature herself is derived.
>
> --Plotinus, quoted by Barfield in Bloom, p. 43.

By the late sixties, Birney's theme and form have become nearly indistinguishable. His original concern with human survival has been channelled into a personal career of dedication to the evolution of poetic art. Meanwhile, the irony which first proved so valuable in handling the dualities of man and nature has only grown to cosmic proportions, and become the major theme itself. In short, revolution has given way to evolution, and survival in life and poetry has come to depend upon creative involution. Nature is internalized and resurfaces, by organic projection, in Concrete patterns of visual and aural mimesis.

The ironic persona as used by Plato and Chaucer has become in the twentieth century a symbol of human identity, more literally and universally appropriate than ever before. In this state of critical and deeply personal *alienation*, Birney finds that subjectivity and objectivity are one. His

own personality becomes his only persona in "November Walk"; but that character's poetic articulation reflects a quite literal world-vision. Birney's retreat into personality is so complete as to constitute what Eliot called an "escape from personality,"[1] an aesthetic dissolution into a transparent persona. The waste land which inevitably emerges is treated with complete objectivity because it quite clearly speaks for itself. At the same time, the poet's active faculties are still at work behind the scenes, selecting, arranging, and composing fragments in the lingering Romantic hope of experiencing at least a reconstructed feeling of natural communion.

The Concrete phase serves as a crucial transition in Birney's career, which helps him through the depression of a justified paranoia about the fate of the world and his role in it, and brings him into a new identification with his poetic materials. This is not to say that he loses sight of his serious themes, or that he chooses to ignore them; rather he reassures himself that the most viable personal course of action remains in the field of art. He feels more deeply than ever that the *only* weapon, however effective, to use against death and destruction is life's power of creation, and recreation. The Concrete poems themselves reflect this faith at best implicitly and indirectly--in accordance with their purest formal *raison d'être*.

"what's so big about GREEN?", on the other hand, speaks out so directly that it might be mistaken for the voice of Rufus reincarnate. But Birney retains the same careful distance from this most personal persona, as that characterizing "David," *Trial* and "November Walk." A long life of personal ironic survival has narrowed the difference between ideal and real to the tones of a common voice. Yet the distance between those tones still separates life and death. So one might call this latest narrator the Concrete persona: the absolute range of the human voice, objectively speaking, which is yet detachable as mere form from the ongoing human spirit.

The Organic Architect

Concrete form stands in relation to content as an echo to its voice. This relation is especially clear in poems making use of the "figure of sound," which is less onomatopoeic than indicative of the musical nature of language itself. Poetic theme becomes less specific and more universal, as form becomes Concrete and self-sufficient. The *use* of form becomes, in effect, the poet's primary theme. In visual Concrete form, the entire image does not so much indicate a particular natural object, as it represents the transcendent symbolic power of words in print, as graphic, as well as linguistic, artifacts. In this central paradox lies Birney's formal irony: that on the surface, Concrete's

objective form hides subjective content; but in the deeper motivation of composition, the form stems from an overriding subjective conception of the very role of language, while thematic content is distilled to the value and essence of *objectivity*. Further, Birney's experimentation itself implies an objective detachment from the practice of his own craft, which enables him to adapt to a world in change.

Two of the most memorable images in Birney's more traditional verse are as "concrete" as possible, in the more traditional sense. Both are in *Near False Creek Mouth* (1964), the last volume of new poems until *Rag & Bone Shop* (1971), dominated by typographical Concrete. And both illustrate the irony that subjective meaning faces when forced to an objective proof. The first is in "Cartagena de Indias," where Birney finds the rare solace of "brotherhood" in a monument to the shoes of poet Luis Lopez:

> the shoes are concrete
> and ten feet long

and pliable enough to fit the delighted Birney, who proclaims to his city, the reading world,

> 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

The doubly concrete image is clearly the most effective and universal means of communication that Birney finds here.

The other image, however, ends this pivotal volume with a darker note. "It was the hand that caught in me," Birney

begins "Arrivals," which reveals the ironic underside of the positive value of the concrete image. Like the "shoes of deadman Luis," the hand of the lawyer frozen in snow serves as a focus for "brotherhood":

> We too anonymous one to the other
> but our breaths write on the air
> the kinship of being alive
> surrounding the perfect stranger

Birney's ironic doubt about the positive spirit surrounding the image of death is evident in the pun (a sort of "dirty" Concrete) "perfect." This *malaise* infects the survivors:

> The rest of us circle about
> as if for somewhere to put down the guilt

but the logic of the courtroom is lost, as usual, to nature's indifferent ears. Even though the train is superficially to blame, the concrete "longfingered hand" speaks of a more metaphysical predicament,

> stretched in some arresting habit of eloquence
> to the last irrational judgement
> roaring in from the storm

Birney wonders if only he can appreciate the mute "eloquence" of the concrete gesture--

> Or is it only in me that the hand hooked
> and I who must manage it now like a third?

But the negativism of this final question must be answered by the success of the poem, by the poet's achievement of a "kinship" with readers. Birney's taking on of the "third" hand becomes a kind of macabre mutation, a biological metaphor expressing the very role of art in furthering human survival.

Meanwhile, Birney had actually begun his experiments in Concrete form proper, in a series accompanying new building designs in the *Journal, Royal Architectural Institute of Canada,* 35 (April 1958). Thus he helped pioneer the international movement in Concrete which only began in earnest in the early fifties. This particular series of poems was revised and reprinted in 1969 for an edition of *grOnk* (a Concrete periodical), with the special support of noted Canadian Concretist bp nichol.[2] It is noteworthy as a study of the continuity of Birney's craft. The outstanding image, as found in the final version (entitled "Buildings" in *R&BS)*[3] is

```
l      s
 o    l
  g  l
   wa
   ha
  o  n
 l    d
d      s
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Though a "childishly" simple image, as several critics have noted in general of the Concrete, it expresses immediately the entire thematic imagery of the earlier "Hands," in *David and Other Poems*. Other sections of the *Architecture* series were revised in either "Buildings" or "the shapers: vancouver," the latter (in *what's so big about green?* 1973) an interesting blend as well of highly concrete images taken from the speeches of the Salish Chief and E. O. Seen in *Trial*. This evolution of Birney's form is organic, in that

even his radically new Concrete architecture builds with materials recycled, as it were, from his old word-hoard. The prime importance of the experimental phase thus resides not in the traditional effects expected from individual poems, but in the exemplary pattern of the poetic growth itself.

Judith Copithorne, who later collaborated with Birney and two other Concrete poets in a collection of shape-poems (*Four Parts Sand*, 1972), appreciates Birney's adaptation of new forms to old, and its relevance to the cultural context. Her view of *Rag & Bone Shop*[4] finds that "Birney represents a living traditon" in contrast to "the traditions dying around us." Birney seems to have found a practical solution in pure objectivity to the problems encountered in the intense subjective crisis of "November Walk." And yet in such form the personal and national life is wholly contained. Copithorne elaborates:

> The Rag & Bone Shop reflects Earle Birney's life and it also reflects a common life we canadians lead, shattered almost to schizophrenia, held together more by will than by joy. Yet alive, still connected to the mountains, the sea, still capable of those hard pragmatic pioneering skills which some day soon may be what we most need.

Birney Concretely depicts the fragments comprising the mythical Canadian "identity" in "up her can nada" *(R&BS)*. Yet through an ironic mixture of enduring will and joy Birney composes a map which unites the disparate elements of his country. The blend of colors, type sizes and visual

patterns is both chaotic and creative; such linguistic art truly imitates the life it signifies, and on this most Concrete level manages to convey an identity. As in "November Walk," Birney depicts the Canadian identity as a surface chaos containing an underlying potential for creative order and life.

One last example of Birney's Concrete, "University" *(R&BS)*, should serve to show the power of association contained in such simple form. The central dialectic of his whole body of ironic poetry, especially as seen in the major works, is reflected most clearly in the use of black and red ink (indicative of death and life), which highlights a manifold contrast. The word-forms created in red are "UN," "U," "ERR," and "SEE." The pattern applies to the ironic process itself, by which error negated brings true vision (UN-ERR-SEE). Such a movement also takes place on a simpler level from the negative "UN" to the positive "U," and from the public "UNIVERSITY" to the individual "U." In such poetry Birney fuses pleasure, instruction, and sheer visual music. Its disarmingly simple mechanism hides a subtler balance and proportion in the movement of the poet's mind, as he attempts a most intimate mimesis of natural harmony.

Copithorne's appraisal of the pressing need for cultural identity, survival and growth is well-placed in Birney. Most important of all is her recognition that to appreciate the example of harmonious growth in the seemingly self-enclosed

world of the Concrete poem is actually the most pragmatic of skills in the task of constructing a meaningful "common life." Birney both learns and teaches, by his composition, revision and growth, that "Living art, like anything else, stays alive only by changing."[5]

The Concrete Persona

"what's so big about GREEN?", the title poem of Earle Birney's latest book of new poems (1973), works with a renewed simplicity of style, on the surface, with double layers of irony informing the underlying tone. It is at once Birney's most explicit attack on human exploitation of a once-natural world, and his most implicit and personal recognition of an ultimate human shortcoming. The first and most obvious veil, the speaking persona, utters a dramatic monologue on behalf of abstract Man and Nature, against organic "Life." Below this overt surface bias, the voice sounds false to living humanity for taking such a stance. But neither level of irony is wholly consistent; each gives way to an undertone of Birneyan self-reflection. In the surface tone, the persona lapses at times into a neutralizing objectivity which negates its own bias and in effect falsifies its position. The auditor/reader hears an echo of true satire coming from the author himself, whose more "organic" sympathies are clear. But at the same time, the persona is at least an accurate (and "true" in that literal sense)

characterization of humanity in the historical *act* of survival. The source of this voice is meant to be not Birney as he would like to hear man or himself, but Birney as he has found man and himself: false to the welfare of "Life," but true to his own survival. Man's relation to Nature is one of both conflict and communion; and both are echoed in Birney's ironic voice.

The immediately apparent satiric tone of "what's so big about GREEN?", inevitable as a weapon of self-defense against one's mechanistic surroundings, carries a freshness reached only after the long and serious struggle preceding it. Birney has transcended the subtle but tragic dramatic irony of "David," both foreshadowing and nostalgic, and surpassed as well the almost cynical, though lyric, bitterness of "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth." He has clearly profitted from his Concrete phase of experimentation; his language is rejuvenated, and with it, his approach to the theme of survival is more vigorous than ever. The poet returns to an original comic faith found in *Trial of a City:* and now underlying his far-ranging criticism of the progress of civilization is a deeper, more personal awareness of the greenness of the old human spirit.

The movement in Birney's style may be compared with the ironic tendency of Romantic poetry in the nineteenth century. The most obvious examples would be the change from Wordsworth to Byron, or from Shelley to Browning, from elegaic

rapture to the fully controlled ironic persona of the dramatic monologue. In an attempt to confront the issues of a dehumanizing society, Browning found that a more detached perspective allowed an objective treatment of subjective material which might otherwise deepen into a personal crisis. Technically, the change is reflected, as in Birney, by a personalization of language, from sublime or formal poetic elevation to a more democratic reverence for linguistic personality. The colloquial persona of "what's so big about GREEN?" allows Birney to escape his inherent human guilt against Nature by the act of projection. The redeeming irony of his detachment, however, as in Browning's, lies in the necessary acceptance of that projection as a true part of the artist as man.

Birney creates another dramatic situation from which conflicting tendencies arise in relation to the reader--those of sympathy and judgment. The lowering of formal poetic style to the rhythms and diction of everyday speech recalls the characters of Gassy Jack and Mrs. Anyone, especially, from *Trial of a City*. And as in all the previous narrators, speakers and witnesses (conceivably including even Legion), an ironic tension in theme and style holds the reader in limbo while setting the poet free. The difference here lies in Birney's more transparent authorial role: transparent first in his obvious initial distance, or absence, but again in his clear periodic support, and finally in his

consistent tonal irony--a subjective presence simultaneously expressed in and detached from the poem as a whole vocal artifact. In "what's so big about GREEN?" Birney effectively translates the choral message of *Trial of a City* into the personal mode of "November Walk," with a positive delight in Concrete construction of form.

Birney's thematic purpose continues, as before, to concentrate on breaking the illusion of simplicity in judging man's conflict with nature. He still satirizes man's willful departure from a natural state of being; but here his ironic acceptance of that fall, as a requirement of the wholly natural law of survival, becomes most convincing.

Through the persona Birney creates an illusion of a clear-cut delineation of responsibility for man's exploitation of nature. Man in the modern abstract is allied with primal forces of both chaos and order, against the intermediate, organic blend of these principles which is "Life" itself. The real problem, however, is more complex. If one is to believe the persona, then the age-old conflict is academic and we must side with Man. Conversely, if we recognize the obvious poetic irony of the dramatic monologue, one must disagree with the speaker and side with his enemy, "Life." However, in light of Birney's sophisticated but basic sympathy with humanity *and* nature, one must discard the conflict itself as a simplistic illusion. His deeper, subjective irony undercuts the surface of satire, exposing

both sides of the issue to the light of an underlying unity of interpenetrating connections. In this way it becomes increasingly clear to the "bystander"[6] that Man's attack on Nature contradicts his own true nature.

The complexity of the problem of survival, both thematically and stylistically, reveals itself in the inconsistency of the persona's tone. Birney finds even in his handling of the poem that a simple ironic perspective is not effective enough, that the persona cannot be simply right on his own terms, wrong on the reader's, or even both on the poet's. Instead, the speaker himself must be victim to self-contradiction, must exhibit a truly organic composite of values even in his apparently one-sided stance. In this way he really reflects the paradox of his creator, a bundle of organic sympathies ordered by their opposite, human detachment from nature, into apparent consistency. If one gives Birney the credit for full consciousness of his creative process, then there is a double irony at work. First, the speaker's explicit position is exposed by intuitive reading to be false. But more on the level of his "unconscious" use of language (again assuming *conscious* use by Birney), that is his medium below his message, lapses in tone reveal consistency itself to be the more significant illusion. Thus the doubt and ambiguity implied in both the title and ending of the poem is justified and intentional. Birney resolves in the writing of the poem that simple consistency on either

side of this question of survival is neither possible nor desirable. He finds the irony of the classic Romantic, freedom only in incompletion, resolution only in unresolvable paradox.

To begin with, however, it is possible to go as far as Birney has in offering tentative arrangements of opposing points of view. His satiric persona is obviously not Birney's real voice, or anyone's on the surface. But that first easy judgment is too easy--in fact the voice must be Birney's and everyone's, the loud voice of historic human actions. The poet's initial, objective overstatement tempts a reaction against it, and then Birney's subjective irony turns against the reaction, revealing his overstatement to be closest to truth.

"On a first reading," Brower has written, "continually ironic poetry often seems to explode in all directions at once; but by looking for expressions that exhibit similar uses of language and similar oppositions, we may discover continuities not wholly unlike those to be found through studying recurrent images and metaphors."[7] Birney blends colloquial figures of speech, metaphors taken from mythology, history, geology and chemistry, and rhetorical device to produce a clear division: "Us" against "'Life'."

The first four stanzas make this opposition clear. "Something went haywire," Birney begins, in reference to what he later calls "the Original Plan." Against this

seemingly predetermined empire of ice is the random element that causes "A tilt," in the earth as pinball machine; as the shift in the earth's axis ends the Ice Age. Already man is aligned with the order of the icecap; for "without Us there to stop it," the disintegration begins: the "drip & rot all over again." Feeding upon this degeneration of the frozen lock, the comparatively anarchic forces of "'Life'" can begin their regeneration. The fish slide "Up from the stinking seas/ the corrupt South;"[8] accompanied by "The stubborn grass," and creeping mice. But "Our good old lava" boils up "a rash of volcanoes" to fight Life's own tiny, sloshing "hydrocarbons." Finally, sulphur springing from the still "faithful magnum" remains "holding off even the algae/ something pure/ perfumed with primal chaos."

There is an apparent contradiction even here, however, between the ordered reign of the icecaps and the "primal chaos" of volcanoes, in their common alliance against "'Life'." Birney also ambiguously employs the term "stink" to refer both to the life-bearing seas and to the deadly sulphurous lake. And "'Life'" itself proceeds by means of a "truce" between elements in internal conflict:

> a saw-off between berries & birds
> & those First Men
> the Chehaylis
> inching up the outlet stream
> to follow sperming salmon

Such simplicity of style obscures the dynamics of ecological tension in balance. Life-and-death struggle for survival

takes place not only "between berries & birds" but between these elements of nature, including the salmon, and "those First Men." Thus Birney's clear-cut duality suddenly becomes a muddled illusion. Man *may* be seen, not in separate opposition to Nature, but as part of an integral pattern of organic tension and harmony.

The primitive Chehaylis, like the Salish who replaced them and whom Birney championed in *Trial of a City*, were armed with the vital "chemistry of belief." Their survival was aided by the "holy water" of the "Lake of Healing," and by an essential spiritual consciousness making that magic meaningful. In contrast, the present museum offers only sterile "snaps" of the area's past scenery, "taken before We started the quarry." Birney takes an objective view in these stanzas (5, 6, and 7) which presents the more serious contradiction of his own persona's style. The rhetorical prejudice is neutralized, and in effect reversed to a romantic sympathy with what "We" have destroyed. Birney's dilemma is similar to the problem of identification with the Salish testimony in *Trial*. He is compelled by his personal sentiments to stand by the primitive world-view, while also forced by modern reality to detach himself from it. There is then a deeper comic bitterness in the return to his initial voice:

> They all went when We came
> just a couple of centuries ago
> --the whites the End Men
> arrived to set things straight

Such an alternation of objective and subjective tone, of covert sympathy and overt bias, brings an increasing intensity to the progress of the poem.

The new western explorers shed their "faiths on the rivers," rather than gaining it there. They did manage to bypass the primal chaos of "Hell's Gate," but only to build an ice-like "fort/ on the Place of Healing." With this new stronghold of nature's original anti-life force, the "pines," "the game & the Indians," and "everything wearing fur" were destroyed. All these events were manifestations of a survival force in itself, but one opposed to the proliferation of other life forms, instead of respectful of the common harmony. These "End Men" set out not only to succeed as a species, but to remake their surroundings in their own white, furless image. Having restored in effect the blankness of ice, they "moved on from the silence they made."

Life in its full flowering was not to be kept down, however, and once again, "rain & new bush/ dissolved the fort/ The Lake almost won." The counterattack quickly resumed, too, but this time with a fatal mistake: "They rushed up to eat the gold/ & died of it." It seems that alchemical magic does not work without true faith in natural, "holy water." Attempting to transmute the natural gold into human substance was the wrong way to survival; and the result proved that organic necessity comes first.

With the coming of another "truce," this time merely a "lapse/ into a sort of quiet," Birney returns to his mock bias against "the slimy chlorophyll." The tone of the poem once more shifts from that of the original persona to a more objective account of human history. Again it may seem as if, faced with the reality of man's exploitation of his environment, it is difficult for Birney to support his persona wholeheartedly. But his craft deserves more credit. The satiric tone, once established, is able to color the contrast which follows, of modern man against primitive life. Since that description is unbiased even in imaginative metaphor, the substance of man's actual role is made clear; his actions speak for him. Thus the facts complement the narrator's periodic sympathy with an underlying picture of truth; the juxtapositon aids the ironic technique by a subtle penetration of the illusion of bias.

In the satiric context of the poem, Man is identified with the cosmic dimension of nature which is alien to earthly life. Such a standpoint is perfectly possible, yet limited by its denial of intermediate identification with natural forms. The delicate truce of which life consists is considered as lesser than such transcendent entities as

> . . . our raging Sun
> that swims in the real peace
> seething away with the Others
> unheard & unhearable

But more importantly, Birney's detachment from such direct statement leads to more complete truth. His bias is simply

an extension of real human actions.

> A railway really gets
> a wilderness by the throat
> sends fingers in
> to rub the green skin off

Birney reveals his real position with a switch from first-person to the use of the subject "They," who

> multiplied that old mephitic stink
> into a general sulphite wind

Such detachment from his own persona provides the crucial perspective for the reader, who may join Birney in a feeling of total ironic freedom.

Kierkegaard investigates the ironist's deepest motives:

> When an ironist exhibits himself as other than he actually is, it might seem that his purpose were to induce others to believe this. His actual purpose, however, is merely to feel free, and this he is through irony.[9]

The process is reminiscent even of Birney's earlier major poems, especially *Trial*. It involves an illusion of poetic identification with statement made overtly for satiric effect; followed by an intuition of ultimate denial of each stated position. The intuition comes from a pervasive ironic tone consciously intended by Birney. Again Kierkegaard finds that in such poetry "Irony is not present at some particular point in the poem but omnipresent in it, so that the visible irony in the poem is in turn ironically mastered."[10] The result is a three-dimensional depth to the work that elicits a creative response on the part of the reader's judgment. Thus in "what's so big about GREEN?" one

sees with Birney's eyes the ironic truth stated by Schlegel, that rational Man need not be opposed to the organic chaos of Nature, that "Man is Nature creatively looking back at itself."[11]

What brings about the feeling of unity through detachment is Birney's self-consciousness. His critical self-awareness in the natural world as well as in society and in his own composition is evident as early as "David," and expresses the most balanced resolution in the tone of this latest poem. Birney has undertaken the quest of the modern Romantic, who like his best nineteenth-century predecessors,

> turned away, not from society to nature, but from nature to what was more integral than nature, within himself. The widened consciousness of the poet did not give him intimations of a former union with nature or the Divine, but rather of his former self-less self. One thinks of Yeats's Blakean declaration: "I'm looking for the face I had/ Before the world was made."[12]

Birney finds that face in "what's so big about GREEN?", with a voice to go with it; finds that it is made in Man's image, and that it must be his own mask as well.

With the progress of time to the present, the ironic identification in "We" becomes more immediate and inclusive of Birney as modern man in a very real sense. His satire is forced to turn directly back on himself, by association with the

> . . . ulcerous burghers
> from the northamericities
> to be dunked in the pool
> before color tv & sedation

Actually, then, the purpose of posing behind the mask "We" has a double function. It first is a means of revealing the true nature of man's attitude toward his habitat; but secondly, it confesses and thus relieves Birney of the responsible guilt felt as a very real member of what he calls "my generation." The narrator here, as in "David" and "November Walk," finds himself victimized by environmental circumstances beyond his control. By confessing his plight, he partly escapes it, and reestablishes a degree of innocence.

Birney cultivates a tone of levity, then, as he recognizes that he has no choice but to accept a world committed to "oil & shit," "new instant-blasticrete . . . for a new rocketport," and napalm (itself an ironic compound of plastic and fire). Organic man is doomed, part of life which is "only science fiction/ a nightmare soonest over." In the midst of this starkest thematic contrast, Birney retains an almost innocent spirit of linguistic play: "Green : gangrene." He has long ago accepted man's predicament in a situation of "double doubleness," and as early as 1955 revealed the poet's special occupation in such a world: "You can even pick up a quick dollar out of your despair writing about what we'll do to the outer galaxies after we've blown up Earth."[13] Even in such candor Birney shows a feeling of ironic responsibility in the use of the pronoun "we."

The irony of "what's so big about GREEN?" is precisely that implicit in the survival of life itself, intensified by human self-consciousness. What Birney calls "organic death" is only life itself; but its natural continuity is threatened by man's conception of it as an "Original Plan." Thus "We" have made organic balance "an irreversible reaction," because we have overextended our power of survival. Simple coexistence has given way to intolerant domination of "lesser" life forms, in the interest of a mythical appointment with transcendent destiny. Responsibility for following these imagined orders from on high rests solely with "proud" man, ironically joined by Birney, and ultimately by his readers--who in reality have all helped "Ourselves" in the sterile quest to get "back/ in step with all the other planets."

The final image in green print, "Our kids," highlights the crux of the problem, which carries its own solution. The technological progress for physical survival was necessary for continuance of the species, and thus undertaken in large part, even if instinctively, for the benefit of "Our kids." Such justification becomes misleading when turned into an absolute sanction for violence done to the planet, and an outright illusion when attempts at provision for a decent life for future generations neglect destructive "side-effects." The final irony stems from the fact of the kids' graphic greenness, Concretely explicit on the black-and-white page of historic account: they themselves are a part

of the very organic substance whose death they required.

* * *

Birney's hope has progressed from its tragic clothing in an allegorical episode ("David") to the ironic colorings of the wider allegory that is history. In each major poem the aspiring human sensibility must struggle for an existence that transcends mere survival, that finds purpose in an otherwise meaningless world. Life in each case, that of the individual or that of the human race, has taken on the nature of a quest. The quest is Romantic in its manifestation as the creative process itself. Bloom writes that "the man prophesied by the Romantics is a central man who is always in the process of becoming his own begetter, and though his major poems perhaps have been written, he has not as yet fleshed out his prophecy, nor proved the final form of his love."[14] Birney lends support to Bloom's characterization with the explicit admission, "The only poems of mine I wholeheartedly like are the ones I'm still hoping to write. . . . I'm grateful enough to have appeased one of my ghosts."[15] The ironic quest proceeds with continual resolution despite ultimate irresolution. In Birney's work the central analogue is between the creative struggle of life to survive against its own backwash of death, and the poetic struggle to retain a redeeming faith in creation despite the context of a seemingly hopeless and destructive reality. Each part of this analogue is ironic in its own right, and Birney's work finds

its central irony, as well as its *élan vital*, in the fusion of the two.

That life can be made more successful and meaningful by conscious and self-conscious direction is the central ethic and aesthetic of Birney's poetry. He sees a paradox in the uniquely dual power of human "creativity," which underlies both his objective uses of irony and his ironic view of himself and his work. But he finds a reconciliation and salvation in the power of art. Ultimately, Birney states his own fundamental "Reasons and Unreasons for Poetry":

> We live in a western society deluged and bedevilled by the products of our disordered inventiveness, and in a total world equally swamped by the fundamental (and also uncontrolled) creativity of people, making more people. And there is the paradox that this increasingly creative world of ours is increasingly conformist, negative, and destruction-bent. Only two forces continue to operate, it seems to me, clearly in the direction of peace and relative happiness. And these are love, and art. And only art has within it the principle of order.[16]

FOOTNOTES

[1]"Tradition and the Individual Talent," in Bate, p. 529.

[2]Birney, *Pnomes Jukollages and Other Stunzas, grOnk* Series 4, No. 3, eds. bp nichol, bill bissett, and david uu (Toronto: Ganglia Press, 1969).

[3]*Rag & Bone Shop* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971), n.p.

[4]Review in *Georgia Straight*, No. 151 (October 1971), rpt. in Nesbitt, pp. 183-84.

[5]Birney, "Experimentation Today," *The Creative Writer* (Toronto: CBC Publications, 1966), p. 71.

[6]From a definition of irony in "Chaucer's Irony," I, 10.

[7]Brower, p. 52.

[8]Birney may be consciously echoing Ezra Pound's "Sestina: Altaforte":

> Damn it all! all this our South stinks peace.
> . . . . . .
> In hot summer have I great rejoicing
> When the tempests kill the earth's foul peace

in *The Selected Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1956), pp. 7-9.

[9]Kierkegaard, p. 273.

[10]Ibid., p. 336.

[11]*Ideas*, No. 28, in Firchow, p. 243.

[12]Bloom, pp. 15-16.

[13]"The Writer and the H-Bomb," p. 40.

[14]Bloom, p. 24.

[15]Statement accompanying "The Bear on the Delhi Road," in Paul Engle and Joseph Langland, eds., *Poet's Choice* (New York: Dell, 1962), pp. 56-57.

[16]"Reasons and Unreasons for Poetry," *The Creative Writer*, p. 2.

CHAPTER VI

EPILOGUE: DELIVERANCE

> And I looked out, on the mindlessness and the beauty.
> --James Dickey, *Deliverance*, p. 152.

In *Survival*, Margaret Atwood traces the problem of survival, as seen in Canadian literature, to its source in the psyche. She finds that

> at some point the failure to survive, or the failure to achieve anything beyond survival, becomes not a necessity imposed by a hostile outside world but a choice made from within. Pushed far enough, the obsession with surviving can become the will *not* to survive (p. 34).

Such is the irony of human survival as developed throughout Birney's work. Atwood outlines a series of four "Basic Victim Positions" (pp. 36-39), in which Canadian literary characters find themselves forced to play allegorical "games" with antagonistic environmental forces. Atwood's progression suggests, as Birney's poetic growth supports, a growth of consciousness for the Canadian reader as victim. In fact, each of his major poems is directed increasingly inward toward a constructive enlightenment; and each poem becomes more effective with the poet's own increasing vision and talent.

Position One, Atwood proceeds, is *"To deny the fact that you are a victim."* The *"Basic game"* played by characters in this position is thus "'Deny your Victim-experience'." "David" is the story of a coming to full realization of man's fate as a victim of circumstance--which includes both natural and human causes--but which ultimately lies beyond finite causality. At the beginning of the poem the climbers are unaware of their impending doom. But the reader is supplied with metaphorical portents of danger, a dramatic irony in which the characters are ingnorant only because they are inside the language of the poem. Their innocence is a denial of experience, which by the end can be denied no longer. Thus Bob's run down the mountain colors the landscape with his own recently horrified imagination, and the nature so recently idealized is implicitly blamed for his friend's death. This brings him to a further stage, but with the reader still a step ahead. For Birney has consciously used the pathetic fallacy for ironic purposes, for the reader's intuition of ultimate blamelessness.

The human characters of *Trial of a City* fall, like Bob's subconscious imagination, into the trap of Position Two: *"To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea. . . . The basic game* in

Position Two is *Victor/Victim."* All of these abstractions are absorbed into the menace of damnation by decree of the "Office of the Future" acting through its virtuoso agent Gabriel Powers. The theme is as universal as mortality and as specific as urban ecology in Vancouver. But Birney turns the courtroom battle into a language game, in which the object is mutual "displacement" (in Atwood's terms) of the cause of victimization. The result for the reader, as usual with Birney's poetry, is a more general placement of the cause of damnation everywhere, which is nowhere.

This process of enlightenment leads to Position Three, *"To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable. . . .* I can stop seeing myself as a *fated* Victim." The victim now is in a position to make a more positive response to his situation; *"The basic game . . .* is repudiating the Victim role." Here Atwood is mainly concerned with positive identification of oppression--"dynamic anger" and "constructive action." Birney's "November Walk" includes these positive steps but is more complex in retaining a cosmic nihilism as well. Birney cannot really feel safe in "repudiating the Victim role" altogether, as Atwood suggests. As his own character now, he has grown beyond merely pointing fingers at institutional or natural causes for human suffering. In this sense, then, he does come to possess Atwood's essentially neutral quality in Position Three. Though naming and

describing the wreckage of civilization, the poetic tone is tempered by an existential acceptance--not of a finite victim role, but of an eternally dual character of the universe, both destructive and creative.

What Birney has found as well in "November Walk," however, is more redeeming than the abstract consolation of infinity. He shows a positive personal commitment to poetic form as viable means of self-expression, even self-creation. The visual pattern and the lyrical sounds of the poem both closely anticipate the Concrete experiments which follow. Thematic irony has reached its limit and passes into the pure irony of form itself, where the theme is the creative interplay of form and formlessness. In the seventies, Birney's senses of self-parody and self-celebration come to comprise one most human voice. By the time of "what's so big about GREEN?", Birney has brought the attentive reader to what Atwood calls "Position Four," that of "a creative non-victim."

In this position, "Victor/Victim games are obsolete," because the idea of play and the idea of life are merged into one: into art, or into life lived creatively. One is no longer a victim because one no longer feels that one is a victim; or one can accept external victimization as a necessary part of organic existence. By shouldering that latter responsibility, one contains victimization and thereby is free to transcend it, to continue despite it. The

achievement of "what's so big about GREEN?" is a lifelike transcendence of the deadly game of survival being played out so skillfully on its own synthetic surface. Below the persona's disagreeable voice an internal agreement may be heard, where the reader's conscience joins Birney, Man and fertile "Mother" Nature in sharing responsibility for life's comic tragedy. In the absence of God or abstract gods, all natural beings and things play the role of God. Birney has taken us to a mystical Position Five only "postulated" by Atwood. There are no separate victors or victims, only Ironic Survival.

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CL--Canadian Literature

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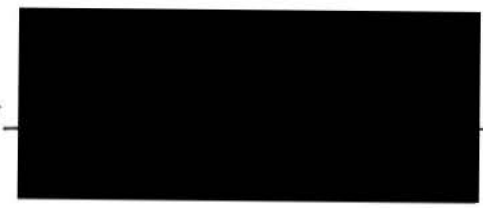
Author 

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