

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA
THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE IRONIC PERSONA IN
THE WORK OF EARLE BIRNEY

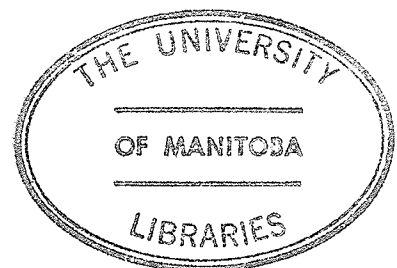
by
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ABSTRACT

Perhaps the most salient feature of Earle Birney's travel poetry of the fifties and sixties is the emergence of its ironic narrator. In essence, this narrator is a tourist puzzled by what he sees in the foreign lands and cities he visits. He seeks to understand and find meaning in his new experiences, but rarely knows what to look for, moments of revelation coming upon him almost by surprise. From the reader's point of view, this persona is on an unconscious quest whose end is unknown both to him and to the reader.

Although various critics have noted the existence of this persona, no critic has sought to trace this unique poetic voice from the early poetry to the poetry of the fifties and sixties. It is the purpose of this thesis to trace the development of the persona that dominates the travel poems of the fifties and sixties from the early poems of the forties, through the novel Down the Long Table, to the volumes published in the sixties. Birney ultimately found the guise of the tourist an apt way of presenting his impressions of what is important in his human existence. The novel Down the Long Table, which bridges the gap between the poems of the forties and those of the fifties and sixties, indicates the turning point in Birney's method of narration. In the novel, the author finds himself confronted

with a multi-faced character who both acts as a mask for Birney himself and is a developed character in his own right. In the poems of the forties we can detect, at least in inchoate form, the figure of a persona; but it is not until after the writing of Down the Long Table that Birney, in his travel poems of the fifties and sixties, presents to his audience a fully identifiable intermediary between his poem and his reader.

The purpose of Chapter I is to define the persona as he is fully developed in the 1960's, using the poem "A Walk in Kyoto" (1958) as representative of this type of work. Chapter II discusses Birney's method of narration in the poetry of the various volumes published before 1953. The discussion centres on poems that have a first-person narrator, who takes the form of an impersonal speaker directly addressing his audience.

Chapter III deals with the novel Down the Long Table, where Birney's treatment of his protagonist, Dr. Saunders, demonstrates his awareness of various problems encountered in methods of narration. In the novel, Birney wrestles with a persona through which he records his impressions. Following the writing of the novel, Birney appears to have chosen, by the end of the 1950's, a particular type of persona. Chapter IV examines a number of travel poems of the fifties and sixties where this now fully developed persona appears.

Finally, Chapter V illustrates how Birney uses first-person narration in various other ways. In the poems narrated by the first-person in the fifties and sixties, there is a group of poems whose first-person narrator is definitely not the poet himself. In Birney's two recent volumes of the seventies dealing with his trip to Australasia, the persona, while identifiably Birney himself, takes two forms: the poet-academic giving poetry readings, and the tourist travelling through strange lands, again uncertain of what he might find.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I INTRODUCTION	1
II EARLY POETRY	10
III DOWN THE LONG TABLE	33
IV TRAVEL POETRY OF THE FIFTIES AND SIXTIES	61
V CONCLUSION	84
NOTES	88
BIBLIOGRAPHY	93

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most salient feature of Earle Birney's travel poetry of the fifties and sixties is the emergence of its ironic narrator. In essence, this narrator is a tourist who seeks some kind of meaning in the foreign lands and cities he visits. He rarely knows what to look for, moments of revelation coming upon him almost by surprise. From the reader's point of view, this persona is on an unconscious quest whose end is unknown both to him and to the reader. The persona, though identifiably Birney himself, has not the wider vision of Birney the author and functions as a mask through which the poet speaks of his visions.

Various critics have noted the existence of this process in Birney's work. Richard Robillard, referring to the later poems, writes of "a goal implied, especially in the travel-poems, and there perhaps achieved":

In the living, actual incarnation of myth, in the dancing of spontaneous, traditional people, in the intersection of eternity and the dazzling instant, one can at least glimpse at myth, the resolution of the human and the inhuman. In these later poems Birney conjures meanings from living situations, and the ironical perspectives of the earlier poems fade before his need to become involved in a realized myth.¹

Paul West, reviewing the volume Ice Cod Bell or Stone (1962), writes of Birney's indication in the volumes of the forties that "he is groping after something: a fusion, an amalgam, a compound". West notes that Birney "approached [ICBS] by finding various modes of expression variously unsatisfactory". ICBS contains a "loose combination of voices".² A.J.M. Smith, reviewing Selected Poems 1940-1966, comments on Birney's growth in poetic craftsmanship, upon his "intellectual and emotional maturity", and suggests that the root of this growth is the "achievement of originality, the setting free of a unique poetic personality that after years of work has at last found itself and its true voice".³ Milton Wilson writes of SP:

Self-revelation or self-analysis is not [Birney's] business. And yet, like Chaucer, and increasingly with age, he enjoys offering us a kind of persona in the foreground: the innocent scapegoat of 'Meeting of Strangers', the aging and garlanded ram of 'Twenty-third Flight', the absurdly grateful initiate of 'Cartagena de Indias'.⁴

No critic, however, has sought to trace this unique poetic voice from the early poetry to the poetry of the fifties and sixties. In retrospect, the seeds of the fully identifiable mediary that later emerges are to be found in the early volumes. The narrator of "David", contained in David and Other Poems (1942), has some resemblance to the later persona. Now is Time (1945), a volume of war poetry, has a first-person speaker, but the persona there depicted

is not of the type that eventually dominates the later poetry. In Trial of a City and Other Verse (1952) Birney moves closer to the type of persona he ultimately adopts. The structure of the play "Trial of a City" allows Birney to entertain various personae. That of "Mrs. Anyone", whose vision of divinity in humanity centres in man and his ordinary activities, most nearly approximates the later persona.

It is in the writing of the novel Down the Long Table that Birney gives an indication of the turning point in his method of narration. Here Birney wrestles with a multi-faced persona. Dr. Saunders, the protagonist of the novel, becomes a mask for the poet himself, a developed character in his own right, and a third character with an alias. In this process of delineating the character of Dr. Saunders, it is obvious that Birney confronts various problems in methods of narration.

By the end of the 1950's Birney had settled on a particular persona or narrator for his travel poetry. In effect, Birney's treatment of the persona is allied to Chaucer's treatment of the narrator of The Canterbury Tales; that is, he is clearly the author himself in name but he is a more ingenuous personality. He is a middle-class tourist of moderate affluence who feels out of place in the cities and countries that he is visiting. His moderate affluence,

in contrast to the harsh poverty that he sees in his travels, comes to seem like wealth and he feels vaguely guilty for this wealth.

Birney's persona wanders about looking at the tourist attractions, at the various landmarks in the country, at the foreign cities' commercial facades. He finds these external aspects of the cities and countries highly unsatisfying, for the monuments, museums, landmarks and so forth, serve only to widen the distance between himself and the inhabitants of the visited places. His wealth does nothing to bring him to an understanding of the people. He needs the touch of humanity to give meaning to whatever he observes. Birney, then, depicts his persona as one who is on an unconscious quest for some contact that will add the dimension--that of human contact--to the cultural symbols of the countries and cities he is visiting.

When the persona does find something that renders meaning to his visit, he stumbles across it inadvertently. His realization of the possibility of human warmth amongst diverse peoples is brought about in an unexpected situation in which the persona shares with hitherto uncommunicative people a symbol making possible the human warmth that transcends the strangeness of the land. The symbol that Birney uses to achieve this contact is always some common, universally understood object.

For purposes of definition, an examination of "A Walk in Kyoto" provides a fine example of the process described above. In the first place, "A Walk in Kyoto" has a specific focus in time and space through the title and the addendum "Kyoto and Hong Kong 1958". Just as the poem's locale is clearly defined, so is the character of the speaker through whose consciousness the experience in Kyoto is filtered. The tourist persona visits Japan ostensibly to satisfy curiosity about new places; in fact Kyoto itself does not satisfy the persona. He feels that some undefined intangible is missing.

The first four verse paragraphs deal with the persona's sense of alienation, guilt and dissatisfaction. His reaction to the Japanese maid is one of uneasy distance, for he senses a rejection that he does not understand:

There is so much discretion
 in this small body of an empire
 the wild hair of waterfalls combed straight
 in the ricefields the inn-maid retreating
 with the face of a shut flower I stand
hunched
 and clueless like a castaway in the shoals of
my room
(SP, 10).⁵

The same sense of unease extends in the persona's mind to the people of Kyoto, as he observes the men and the impact of machines:

the Men are being pulled past on the strings of their
engines
 the legs of the Boys are revolved by a thousand pedals
 and all the faces as taut and unfestive as Moscow's

or Chicago's or mine (SP, 10).

The persona sees men as the victims of their machines, the references to the "engines" and the "pedals" suggesting the further alienation of man from man even within the confines of one's own city. It is ironic that the persona has come as a touring observer to enjoy new delights only to find more of the depression and boredom that he has observed in western civilization. Depressed, the persona realizes that the world of man in Kyoto is the same as everywhere: "all the faces as taut...as/mine". Humanity is hidden in a haze of commercialism and materialism and the tourist does not know how to pierce this barrier. The cultural symbols further the persona's sense that he does not know how to deal with this uncomfortable situation. He questions: "The magnolia sprig in my alcove/is it male?" and admits to himself: "The ancient discretions of Zen were not shaped/for my phallic western eye" (SP, 10). He feels very much an intruder, a Gulliver in a strange land:

When I slide my parchment door to stalk awkward
through Lilliput gardens framed and untouchable
as watercolors (SP, 10).

The city's cultural symbols are superficial and meaningless to the persona in the sense that he cannot relate, for example, to the kabuki: he feels so distanced from the people who created these aspects of the Japanese culture. During the course of his wanderings, he stops

become the symbols of a quest, the goal of which was unknown to the persona until this moment of warmth precipitated by the simple enjoyment of watching the antics of a kite. The persona has discovered the answer to a question he framed while on the city streets:

Where in these alleys jammed with competing waves
of signs in two tongues and three scripts
can the simple song of a man be heard? (SP, 10)

The warmth of the maid's smile tends to change the face of the city. The kite which gives rise to human contact takes the form of a paper carp; by extension, this suggests that other formerly meaningless aspects of the city may now be seen in a way conducive to the persona's sense of harmony with his surroundings.

Initially, the persona sees no structure or pattern to what he is doing. He is simply the naive, ingenuous, kindly, awkward tourist visiting strange places. Birney uses the guise of this persona to convey his message of the importance of human contact. In effect, the contact is a by-product of the trip; but this by-product is ultimately the most important, the most enduring aspect of the excursion to Kyoto. Some simple symbol that transcends the strangeness of the city and allows people to exchange a warm gesture is the goal towards which Birney's poem leads both the persona and the audience.

What takes place in "A Walk in Kyoto" is an example

of the process which Birney describes in the travel poetry of the fifties and sixties. In essence, the process is that of meeting people and of feeling rejected by them, of visiting but not understanding the cultural symbols, and finally, of establishing contact with the people through some commonly shared, simple experience.

CHAPTER II

EARLY POETRY

Birney's first volumes of poetry, 1942-1952, examine, above all, the relation between man and nature. As Richard Robillard writes: "The quest to see nature as somehow humanly significant--to see that nature and man share meanings, while nature holds its own dominion--is the largest of Birney's motives in his poems".¹ Birney ultimately demonstrates the indomitability of man in the face of an overwhelmingly vast universe. Ironically, the hugeness and frightening power of nature, rather than subduing man, makes man more determined to assert his individuality. This individuality transcends the power of nature as man alone can put into effect the humanitarian values of love, sympathy for his fellow man, understanding of man's fallibility and understanding of man's strength. In the early poetry, man arrives at an understanding of the values that render his life worthwhile by pitting his strength against that of nature. Nature then becomes significant in that it provides a measure for man's capacities.

In the first poems of the forties, Birney writes of man and nature in a general way; that is, man is not individualized as any particular person. Birney does write

personally in the sense of the use of "I" and "me", but this narrator stands back and speaks of general world situations. The first-person narrator that one finds in Birney's early poems bears little or no resemblance to the persona of the travel poems. In the early poems, Birney does not depict a truly definable mediary between his poem and his reader. The later "I", the persona, is a definable personality through whose consciousness is filtered a situation given a specific time and place: the audience follows the tourist persona's course through an immediate time and immediate worldly circumstance. Despite the lack of a clear resemblance between the early narrator and character and the later persona, the narrator of "David" and the character of "Mrs. Anyone" in "Trial of a City" suggest that it is possible to detect aspects of the early work that form a viable basis for the later poetry.

In general, the early poetry deals with man in the abstract rather than individual man in direct social settings. As such, the narrators in the early poetry are not clearly defined. For example, although the narration of "David" comes to the reader through the narrator Bobby, the reader still does not know who Bobby really is. Bobby tells the story, but is not a strongly identifiable character. The message in the early poetry is more direct, without the filtering through another consciousness

that is at the centre of the poems of the fifties and sixties.

Both "Hands" (dated "Vancouver 1939") and "Vancouver Lights" ("1941") depict the interaction of man and nature in time of war. Neither poem has a definable narrator: each poem has a speaker directly addressing an audience, and the experience in these representative poems of the early volumes is not filtered through another consciousness.

The undefined speaker in "Hands" (SP, 75) speaks personally of "my canoe", "My fingers", "my flesh". He moves as well to general man: "We are gloved with steel and a magnet is set us", and "We are not of these woods". However, the personality behind the first person "I" which also appears--"Now am I frustrate/alien"--remains anonymous. Only one characteristic of the later persona, that of acute alienation, is suggested by the speaker. However, the speaker in "Hands" feels alienated from nature per se; the persona in the travel poems feels alienated from man himself in the natural surroundings of foreign cities. The alienation in "Hands" stems from the speaker's comparison of the destructive cycles of man and of nature. Nature's destructive cycle carries with it the implicit sense of rebirth; that is, nature's "fallen have use and fragrantly nourish the quick". The cruelty of man's destructiveness, his wars with the bombs and the bayonets, are purposeless and

senseless.

In "Hands", Birney sustains an analogy between the "hands" of trees, between the "balsalm fingers" and the "cedar's webbed claws", and the hands of people, hands that are technically advanced and ostensibly civilized ("hands the extension of tools") and hands that are at war ("We are gloved with steel".) In nature, the birth-death cycle is carried on in dignified "silence". Death, in nature, is purposive: dead foliage serves to nourish new growth. Against the essentially static birth-death pattern of nature, man ironically does change in his civilized, technological state. Man's change appears to be progressive, but, in fact his technology brings with it the possibility always of regression. In "Hands" Birney uses animal imagery to convey this possibility. Man listens to the "radio's barkings/the headline beating its chimpanzee breast". The animal imagery, the dog and the chimpanzee in reference to man's technology, is carried over to man himself in the last verse paragraph when the narrator speaks of returning to "the whining poles of the city" where he will find "paws/ clasping warmly over the bomber contract". Another means of conveying man's dehumanized state is the narrator's reference to human beings' hands as the "extension of tools". In the cities man has become the victim of his machine. Mankind's technology has, ironically, reverted man to a non-

thinking being rather than advancing his mental capacities. The tourist persona in Kyoto, it will be remembered, makes much the same observation when he refers to men "being pulled past on the strings of their engines".

Humankind, then, far from being superior to nature, is depicted in "Hands" as being ultimately less capable of coping with the earthly situation than is nature. The speaker leaves the peaceful birth-death cycle of nature to return to the mechanical atmosphere of the city:

Back to the safe dead
wood of the docks the whining poles of the city
to hands the extension of tools of the militant type-
the self-filling patriot pen (SP, 75). writer

The speaker's conclusion is that

We are not of these woods...
our roots are in autumn and store for no spring
(SP, 75).

Ironically, man, superior as a "species" over nature, dies, but his death in "Hands" does not "store for" or contribute to his earthly rebirth.

In "Vancouver Lights" (SP, 76-77) the speaker's attitude towards humanity differs from the attitude rendered in "Hands". The narrator in "Hands" could not relate man to man: he related man to his machine. In "Vancouver Lights" the speaker relates man to man by establishing a significant place for him, and for his myths, in the universe. In the final verse paragraph there exists a sense of the unity of men in mankind's concerted effort to achieve significance in

his world. This sense of closeness of man to fellow man is expressed in the ironic reversal of the last two stanzas. The first three stanzas deal with humanity's smallness in the face of an overwhelmingly huge universe; in comparison with this universe, man is seen as a weak, insignificant creature. Then, in an abrupt reversal of the direction of the poem, the last two stanzas speak of humankind's heroic obstinacy and victorious creativity; by defying this huge macrocosm, which has the apparent power to crush him, man achieves greatness:

Yet we must speak we the unique glowworms
Out of the waters and rocks of our little world
we cunningly conjured these flames hooped these sparks
by our will From blankness and cold we fashioned stars
to our size rulered with manplot the velvet chaos
(SP, 77).

The narrator, the defender of man, speaks of man's mythopoeia:

No one bound Prometheus Himself he chained
and consumed his own bright liver O stranger
Plutonian descendant or beast in the stretching night--
there was light (SP, 77).

The defender of man speaks of humanity's indomitable will. Threatened by pending destruction, man speaks defiantly: he has imposed order upon the universe and out of nature he can make or destroy himself at will. Prometheus, an archetype of man, chose his own course of action in the universe, and he chose to destroy himself. Humanity now has the same choice. The entire poem prophesies the destruction of man,

but the speaker affirms man's importance in his destruction by virtue of the fact that he had, at one time, had light, or had patterned an order in the universe. In the future, despite destruction on earth, creatures ("Plutonian descendant or beast") can say that "there was light". The whole human species, the "glowworms", possess tragic greatness. Humankind cannot challenge the gods: nevertheless, if man is to be destroyed, he will do so himself. Man, then, has the power both to save and to destroy himself; the same power that created light can extinguish it.

In the first stanzas, Birney increases the poem's tension as the smallness of man is extended to the insignificance of his earth in the universe. The narrator suggests first his own smallness in the night; he then goes on to speak of the city itself as a "quilt of lamps"; finally he moves to the earth itself and the planets:

of the changeless night and the stark ranges
of nothing pulsing down from beyond and between
the fragile planets We are a spark beleaguered
by darkness (SP, 76).

Images of man's smallness appear on the very earth: "Across to the firefly/haze of a ship"; Vancouver is a "winking outpost"; men themselves are referred to as "unique glowworms". The narrator fears that the "black Experimentress", queen of the macrocosm, may fail even to locate earth "in the range of her microscope". The speaker fears that the

sun, "Our Phoebus", is merely "a bubble that dries on her slide" (man's life source having no importance in the scheme of the universe).

The abrupt reversal in the last stanzas changes the symbols used in the first stanzas. They assume a new dimension as the speaker voices man's power, for it was men who ascribed to the symbols any power that they may have. In giving expression to the collective power of humankind, the speaker draws men into a form of unity, or a form of closeness. The "primal ink" referred to by the speaker foretells the pending destructive inundation of man's world; mankind alone, however, chooses to be excised from existence: unknown forces or unknown gods have no power to will man either to destruction or to a protracted existence.

The abrupt reversal of the situation in "Vancouver Lights" prefigures Birney's technique in the travel poetry. As in the travel poetry, the abrupt turning point of "Vancouver Lights" expresses a distinct faith in the essential greatness of man. In the travel poetry, however, the focus is on one man in his relation to other men on a highly personalized, individual basis, whereas in early poems, of which "Vancouver Lights" is representative, the focus remains on man in general. The narration in both "Hands" and "Vancouver Lights" is in the first person; the speaker in "Vancouver Lights" uses phrases such as "About me" and "I stir". But, in contrast to the travel poetry, this speaker's

characteristics are undefined. He speaks only in the most general terms: "Yet we must speak"; "our dream's combustion".

The poetry of the forties includes a number of poems about World War II and about war in general. What first-person narration there is in these poems is personal and lyric, and the question of the persona thus does not arise. "The Road to Nijmegen", dated "Holland, January 1945", is representative of the poetry of this type. The speaker finds, in the memory of a woman he loves, the strength to transcend the devastation wreaked by war:

So peering through sleet as we neared Nijmegen
I glimpsed the rainbow arch of your eyes
Over the clank of the jeep your quick grave laughter
outrising at last the rockets
brought me what spells I repeat as I travel this road
that arrives at no future (SP, 89).

The narrator is simply Birney himself, paying tribute to the healing power of love that alleviates "this guilt/in the griefs of the old and the tombs of the young".

In the later travel poems, the persona is assailed by a fierce sense of guilt for the sordid condition of those people whose country he is visiting; he feels strongly that he contributes to their misery because of the discrepancy between his affluence, moderate though it may be, and their poverty. This sense of guilt has no less a presence in the early poetry, particularly in the war poems. "Dusk on the Bay", for example, with its depiction of lands touched and untouched by war, suggests that man's gods are his guns,

that, consequently, he has failed to achieve order in his world; the result is an overwhelming sense of guilt.

Finally, of considerable interest in "The Road to Nijmegen" is the speaker's statement "that only the living of others assures us". A salient message in the poem is that of love for and interest in others as the means to reassure mankind of a purposive existence. In this respect, the war poems prefigure the message of the travel poetry where the persona finds his solace in the moment of epiphany, in that poignant moment of human contact.

In the poem "David" (1942)² Birney deals with a first-person narrator whose character, in certain respects, prefigures the persona of the travel poems. Although Bobby, the narrator, remains largely undefined, Birney does furnish the reader with some clues to his personality. The later fully developed persona defines his own feelings of guilt. Bobby's narration is largely confessional and retrospective. He is a novice abruptly confronted with an unavoidable decision that has the effect of altering his entire perspective on life. In contrast with the persona of the travel poems who learns about himself through contact with people, Bobby discovers his essential being in an encounter with nature's indifferent mountains rather than in the life of the camp, and association with his fellow workers.

"David" is similar to a later war poem "Man on a Tractor" (1945). The narrator here also engages in

disturbing retrospection. There is the same guilt, the same disturbing confusion in the narrator's focus on reality, the same idea of a bitter lesson learned and not to be forgotten. "Man on a Tractor" depicts common farm labour and its possible analogy to the activities of war. The retrospective narrator ironically reminisces: "Now with the breezes of home around me,/why do I daydream of tanks/ and gulping compo with buddies scattered or dead" (Now is Time, 7). He suggests that perhaps his moods of painful reminiscing, where the past war and the present ordinary labour become intertwined, will not be so "odd" to some of his former war troupe who are now engaged in labour similar to his, always with the ghosts of the past war intruding upon the present. Bobby, the narrator of "David", is also the victim of the ghost of a past situation that is possibly the most significant, certainly the most painful, incident in his life.

In "David", Birney's first major poem, the first-person narrator and initiate, Bobby, speaks of climbing "to get from the ruck of the camp, the surly/Poker, the wrangling" (SP, 118). Bobby's one friend and apparent ideal is David. In contrast to David, Bobby appears immature and certainly uneducated in the ways of life and death--the values of which David's code suggests his implicit understanding. Bob learns some truth about his own character not

through the familiar human activities of camp life and the uncertain fellowship of member surveyors in the valley, but through confrontation with the laws of nature as they affect his friend. David adheres strictly to the code that nature follows.³ The mountain goat slips and so must die. David kills the wounded robin, for it can no longer function naturally. David, no longer able to function as his spirit demands after the accident, follows the code of nature and requests death. Bob learns the fallibility of nature's creatures: "that was the first I knew that a goat could slip" (SP, 119); David tells him of the uselessness of Bob's wish to "tame" the wounded bird; Bob's own carelessness produces a confrontation with his moral self that initiates him into the complexities of the human state. Bob's ultimate lesson is the implied parallel between the laws of nature and laws of man.⁴

Bob's initiation into the fallible human state brings to him cognizance of man's guilt. David is the knowledgeable hero of the poem in the sense of his implicit awareness of the code of man and nature. Initially, little is known of Bob other than that he is a novice at mountain climbing. Birney portrays more of Bob's character when Bob takes his moral stand in the last two sections. Here the acute sense of guilt experienced by Bob implies the confessional nature of the entire poem. In section VIII Bob

admits the mistake that led to David's request for death:
 "And I knew/He had tested his holds. It was I who had not"
 (SP, 123). In making this admission, Bob implicitly accepts
 his guilt. Section IX depicts the horror he experiences
 following his pushing David over the ledge. The final
 stanza reveals his lie to the surveyors, or the lie to
 humanity that constitutes his forfeiture of innocence:

I said that he fell straight to the ice where they found him.
 And none but the sun and incurious clouds have lingered
 Around the marks of that day on the ledge of the Finger,
 That day, the last of my youth, on the last of our mountains.
 (SP, 124)

Bob, while narrating in the present, is, in fact,
 recollecting the past: "David and I that summer" (section
 IV); "In August, the second attempt" (section VI); "I will
 not remember how nor why" (section IX). The final section
 is most definitive about the narrator's engaging in painful
 retrospection. It becomes clear in section IV that Bob
 feels a need to confess this incident about his past. The
 pain of that incident on the Finger and the subsequent
 feelings of guilt precipitated by his action in an over-
 whelmingly complex, singular human circumstance, remain with
 him and must be voiced in some manner. The last two stanzas
 cast in retrospect, for both Bob and the reader, the
 confessional complexion over the entire poem. What the
 reader knows of Bob, then, is that he was at one time the
 initiate, innocent of the complex intricacies of the human

situation, that he has undergone a traumatic experience, and that, arising from this experience, he has gained insight into the pain and the complexity of man's existence.

Although clues are given that the narrator is dealing with past events, Birney has the narrator speak in such a way that readers are taken into the time of the actual events. The audience is with the narrator in time and place, for example, in the various references to David's teaching Bob the lure of the mountains, the robin incident with David's question: "'Could you teach it to fly?'" (SP, 120), and the references to the challenging Finger. The drama of the accident in sections VII, VIII, and IX, with the desperate verbal exchanges between the two friends, is immediate and very definitely draws the audience into the situation. The final stanza abruptly brings the reader back to the realization that the poem is indeed retrospective. The retrospection on Bob's part is necessitated by the fact that his past situation sustained too many complex moral implications for one being to tolerate; his one attempt to find relief is to give voice to the incident of his youth.

Trial of a City (1952) is a play whose dramatic situation is the trial, judgement and threatened annihilation of the city of Vancouver. Birney focuses on a cast ranging from immediate representatives of Vancouver to ghosts of the past inhabitants. A "Mrs. Anyone" resolves the public

hearing in favour of humanity, or a protracted life for the city.

Trial of a City appears to be a natural extension or expansion of the early "David". In "David" the reader confronts two personalities. Of David himself the reader knows nothing other than that he had an implicit awareness of the code of nature, to which he strictly adhered to the point of requesting his own death. More of Bob's character is given when the audience realizes that the poem is retrospective and that Bob feels an acute sense of guilt. The narrator is still not a true persona in the sense that strong character traits can be assigned to him. In the play, the poet deals with a cast of personae. None of these characters is strongly delineated: they are flat character types assigned to specific roles. Nevertheless, these characters do anticipate the direction of the later poetry in that Birney toys with a number of character types in one work. Of the cast, the character of "Mrs. Anyone" most nearly anticipates the later persona in the sense that she speaks of love for and faith in man.

"Trial of a City"⁵ is subtitled "A Public Hearing into the Proposed Damnation of Vancouver". Birney's cast includes representatives of the present, the future and the past. The Counsel for the Office of the Future, Gabriel Powers, holds a brief proposing the damnation of the city on

the grounds of political, social, and economic corruption:

Treason or true, the Office of the Future
finds this city-pretty now a misfate
in its planes. Like every think of booty,
sir, it's copulated to destruction;
its lifeliness decreases and must ever
pass into nothingmist. (4)

P. S. Legion, Counsel for the Metropolis of Vancouver, defends the city on the grounds of economic and social prosperity: "Last year we got another/Billion dollars out of trees" (34); "our workers aren't dejected--/They've got the highest standards in the universe.../They've got frigidaire --gas furnaces--and a twelve hour week./You [Langland] ought to think twice before you speak./And sneering at BC's Progressive Education!" (35). The motley crew of male witnesses who endorse the city's damnation range in time from the medieval to "five years later" (1) than the present. These witnesses include fourteenth-century Long Will of Langland; eighteenth-century Captain George Vancouver; the Salish Indian Chief who meets Captain Vancouver; Gassy Jack of Gastown; twentieth-century Dr. E. O. Seen, a geology professor at the University of British Columbia. The only witness opposing the annihilation of the city is Mrs. Anyone, "a mere living housewife" (41), whose defence of the city on humanitarian grounds produces the suspension of the sentence.

One of the major ironies of the play is that counsellor Legion ostensibly represents the people. He

speaks for the "mighty city" (10)--mankind's testimony to social, economic and educational progress. But each witness for the people Legion either conjures up from the past or calls upon from the living reaches a verdict contrary to what Legion expects. These witnesses, with the exception of Mrs. Anyone, either denounce the city or predict an inevitable national destruction. Captain Vancouver, for example, states:

A feat indeed in such a trifling time
To piece together so much wood (and grime);
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. (10)

The Salish Chief, contrasting the Indian civilization with that of the white man, speaks:

It is true we had no ceremonies of blood-drinking,
and we did not think of Jehovah.
These, and Hell, the white man brought us. (17)

Gassy Jack would "jest ship out the pretty girls...and the folk that really laugh...the rest don't matter. There's an awful lot of hippycrites in cities...cardsharps and slick traders and landsharks and psalm-singers" (31). Long Will sees of harrassed humanity a soft middle class "Chained as fast to profits as poorer folk to wages" (36). To Will, "B.C.'s Progressive Education" (Legion's phrase) is designed "more to win for the self than to work for the world's good" (35). The geologist claims, "Though life leap to Mars" (25), there is no escaping the destruction of present humanity.

Legion, enthusiastically seeing materialistic values as necessary for the creation of a future super-city, is made to appear the fool. When Mrs. Anyone speaks of the simplicity of natural life, suggesting the inherent values in love and hope, children and nature, Legion becomes "Mr. Pseudo-Legion" about to be "ghosted". Mrs. Anyone claims: "Your name is not Legion--mine is" (44); Mrs. Anyone is the actual spokesman for the Vancouverites, or for humanity.

The importance of "Trial of a City" lies in its illustration of Birney's use of personae. Each member of the cast captures in various poetic forms the language of his time. The personae's taking the forms of public masks befits the artificial situation of the play. Mrs. Anyone is the one character who suggests, in this unnatural situation, the warmly human persona in the midst of the natural situations in the travel poems. She does so not only through her expression of values for which the later persona searches but, in contrast to the other personae of the play, through her more natural poetic speech. The personae represent attitudes commensurate with their time in history. Vancouver's past history is illustrated by the testimonies of Captain Vancouver, the Salish Chief, Gassy Jack, and Long Will. Their testimonies suggest that they will strongly endorse the destruction of the present. Dr. E. O. Seen, the public personality of the scientist,

represents the pessimism one is tempted to entertain when considering the conflict of man against his universe.⁶ Mrs. Anyone, representing not only common man but possibly the persona of the poet himself, speaks simply for a fallible humanity saved by belief in self and by adherence to humanitarian values.

Various references to the radio, the T.V., and the tape recording suggest that Birney is presenting public masks. The Minister speaks: "The proceedings are being broadcast, televised, taped, taken down and otherwise recorded" (2); again, "You'll have to watch his language. ...We're on the air" (26). At the end of the play, the audience is made aware that both the television and the tape recording become inoperative (44-45). (It is interesting to note that Dr. Saunders's story of Down the Long Table is partially for the benefit of a radio audience.) Another intimation of the ensuing personae, or masks, is Legion's early statement: "Let's talk plain English" (4). Contrary to Legion's wish, the poetic "English" of the play is suitably diverse to approximate the range in language found in historical time.

Powers voices a confused medley of sounds. When Legion asks "what grisly unnatural fate/You [have planned] for our city, and when...and why", Powers answers: "Somewhen the Future will, and no why sooner,/dam most god-naturely

Vancouver". Legion's natural reaction is, "What's that? I didn't catch--" (3). The language of the future is largely incomprehensible. Powers's reaction to the geologist's account of time and earth's creation furthers Legion's reaction to the pending confusion of the future:

Prof--Though life leap to Mars it is lost in this fury.

Pow--And then?

Prof--What Sun brings after is Sun's business only.

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

The geologist's account recalls "Remarks for the Part of Death" appearing in Strait of Anian and later revised as "Remarks Decoded from Outer Space" (SP).

The difference is picayune
scarcely a notch on the indicator
whether your young men come to us now
or a few millennia later (SP, 145).

Professor Seen's impersonal words echo Birney's approach to nature in such early poems as "Atlantic Door", "North of Superior", and "Pacific Door". "North of Superior" ends:

The swordless rock the heavenless air and land
that weeps unwept into an icy main
where but the waters wap and the waves wane (SP, 113).

The professor states:

Here incubus ice arcs over all,
presses the shores's bones into the seabed,
licks out fjords, levels the lean peaks
and glittering, humps over the globe's round head.
(24)

The cold, impersonal, futuristic poetry characterizing the

professor's account of the termination of time and space as man knows it tends to complement the Joycean wordplay of Powers, the representative of the future. The professor reduces man's world to a state where time becomes so extended that it is beyond the ability of man to comprehend. The result for man is the confusion mirrored in the poetry Birney has Powers express.

The persona of the early explorer, Captain Vancouver, speaks in calm, rhymed, ironic, simple poetry:

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.
 I had to navigate the lot to say
 If none reached somehow back to Hudson's Bay.
 Bemused with this I never, more's the pity,
 Discerned along those shaggy cliffs a city. (8)

Through the Salish Chief's lyrics, Birney captures the tenor of Indian life:

Salmon was bread.
 When in the Moon of Blossoms the first silverback
 threshed in our basket-traps, my father's drum
 called all the village.
 The red flesh flaked steaming from the ceremonial spit.
 (15)

There is a poignant sadness in the Chief's words: "There was something, I do not know,/a way of life that died for yours to live" (16).

Birney captures medieval alliterative patterns in Long Will's poetry:

Yester in the morning I mused on Little Mountain
 saw a city wake and wink its million windows.
 Squared it lay, squamous with shingle and cement, ...
 (33).

Gassy Jack's poetry is that of an early pioneer swash-buckling persona: "Ah, ye got hotels bigger nor icebergs now, mate, but they're as cold to the soul, man. What can ye drink in em but wish-washy beer" (27).

Legion's persona is that of the harrassed, materialistic near-frantic voice of the present. He refers to the river as being "dirty--but it's busy"; he speaks of the destruction of forests and "another/Billion dollars"; salmon become "Twenty million bucks" (34). Of Long Will, Legion states: "He's attacking Christianity and/The whole profit system" (36). He claims:

Someday we'll be
The universe's capital, the solar super-city.
It took two billion years to get things ready for us.
We want another billion in the kitty. (22)

Legion's poetry is glib and superficial--the voice of a super salesman.

Mrs. Anyone speaks the most natural poetic rhythms in the play. Legion, incidentally, states: "Why listen, lady, you're practically a poet, I can see" (44). She speaks for humanity:

For all mankind is matted so within me
Despair can find no earthroom tall to grow;
My veins run warm however veers time's weather;
I breathe Perhaps and May and never No.

.....
Under the glittering comment of the planets
Life asks, and I am made to give. (43)

She speaks of "mortal cells [dividing] to pain, to laughter" (43), of hope, of man's unconquered will, of his freedom, of

peace that "still has its becoming" (46). Mrs. Anyone resembles the persona of the travel poems in his search for identification with humanity when she states: "The friend emerging from the stranger lights me/Along the ever-branching lanes of human search" (46). The persona in "A Walk in Kyoto", it will be remembered, found, when the initially strange and distant Japanese maid exchanged with him the smile of human contact, the means to transform his cold and unfamiliar surroundings into symbols both warm and personally meaningful.

"Trial of a City" illustrates Birney's mastery of an authentic portrayal of personae. In the intervening years between the early poetry and the later travel poems, he published the novel Down the Long Table. From a cast of characters reacting in poetic language to an artificial situation, he moved in Down the Long Table to the reactions of one man in a realistic situation.

CHAPTER III

DOWN THE LONG TABLE

The novel Down the Long Table marks a change in Birney's method of narration. The novel was published in 1955, between the writing of the poems of the forties and the later travel poems of the fifties and sixties where emerges the fully developed persona defined in chapter one in the examination of "A Walk in Kyoto". The novel appears to be the turning point in the development of Birney's narrative method.

In the forties Birney experimented with various approaches to poetry, including straight-forward statement of fact, lyrical love poetry, and poetry which uses, at least in inchoate form, the figure of a persona. None of the forties poems, however, had a true persona. In Trial of a City, the poet worked with a cast of personae in the contrived situation of a play in verse form. It is in Down the Long Table that Birney directly confronts the problem of dramatic narration in prose form. The novel appears to be somewhat of an extension both of the poem "David" and the play Trial of a City. Bobby, the speaker in "David", while narrating for the most part in the present, is, in fact, recalling the past. In so doing, he gives the reader the

situation of his past but reveals only little of his personality. In the novel, Birney focuses neatly on man himself in direct relation to social circumstances while at the same time revealing the personality of his protagonist, Dr. Gordon Saunders. In "David", the poet dealt with two characters in a viable situation; in the play, he presented a cast of personae in an artificial situation. In his experimentation with the novel form, he delineates one personality in a natural setting, the Depression of the thirties, but works on a larger cast of characters often presented in dramatic form.

The novel is narrated in the third person with infrequent lapses into the first person. Although the circumstances of the book parallel, sometimes very closely, those of his own life,¹ Birney maintains, for the most part, his distance between himself and his decidedly fallible narrator. The distance between the narrator and the reader is also maintained; that is, the reader does not identify strongly with the protagonist. This distancing between the reader and the narrator serves to make the reader more aware of the irony in the situation of the novel. At the same time, behind the narrator the reader senses the now explicitly ironic point of view of the author as he writes of a situation with which he is personally familiar. The autobiographical nature of the book suggests that perhaps

the author is taking stock of himself as he might have appeared in the time and situation depicted. The narrator thus has an ironic overview of his past as he recognizes the painful discrepancy between what he may have expected to find for himself at that time, and what actually did transpire.

Chapters one and two are set in the 1950's with Dr. Saunders' being led before the United States Senate Investigating Committee to have his past ghosts revived. The Investigating Committee's main concern is Saunders' relationship with the Communist Party during the 1930's. The novel ends with Professor Saunders' colleagues and a radio audience ready to judge the story of Gordon Saunders during a brief period in the 1930's. Chapter forty-two, the final chapter, also recalls the former ghosts Jack Barstow and Comrade Bagshaw as they appear years after their own brief radical forays. Chapters three to the end of forty-one deal with Gordon Saunders and his alias Paul Green and with the political ideal this fallible individual attempts to realize for a medley of idealistic and escapist reasons. As the narrator mentally recapitulates events of twenty years ago, he is forced to view himself from, and write in, the third person. Writing in this manner, Birney is forced to wrestle with the problem of a suitable method of narration for a possible persona.

In relation to the naive persona, M. H. Abrams has defined what he calls the "fallible narrator":

a related device for sustaining ironic qualification is the use of the fallible narrator, in which the teller of the story is himself a participant in it but, although he may be neither foolish nor demented, nevertheless manifests a failure of insight, viewing and appraising his own motives, and the motives and action of other characters, through the distorting perspective of his prejudices and private interests.²

The narrator of Down the Long Table is, of course, not only a participant in, but the very protagonist of the novel. Gordon Saunders of the brief period in the thirties is indisputably liable to error and deception. His own interests and his feelings of love and guilt render him absurdly prone to the misjudging of his own inclinations and those of others with whom he associates.

Through Gordon Saunders, Birney delineates aspects of his own life in the Depression of the 1930's. But he does more than depict such autobiographical details as the parallel between Saunders' father and his own father, the university career, and the problem with the Ph.D. degree. Birney creates from his one character several personae. The protagonist in the novel is Gordon Saunders, a lecturer with an M.A. degree at a college in Utah, waiting for a fellowship to enable him to complete his doctorate. He is a man in love with another man's wife but refusing to accept both the woman with her children and his unborn child. He is both

rebel and conformist: "along some dim tunnel of himself, there was another Gordon waving down the train--Crump isn't so bad, he's been shielding you, and what else could a department head--but the Gordon in the cab had the throttle open".³ Saunders becomes the Toronto lecturer and budding Trotskyite. This Saunders moves into the alias of Paul Green and experiences an abortive short-term revolutionary career in Vancouver. Gordon Saunders the student who obtains the doctorate, a wife and family, and desired academic position, comes into focus following the attempted annihilation of Paul Green. Ultimately the respected Dr. Saunders emerges, the professor who gazes down the long table at the masked faces of his inquisitors, who may neither sympathize with nor understand the revelation he is now prepared to voice regarding his confused personality of the thirties.

The Depression of the 1930's provides the setting of the novel. In Utah, Gordon Saunders lectures at a small Mormon college. He hopes to return to Toronto to complete his doctorate with the assistance of a pittance of a fellowship, then to return to Utah as a professor with "The Degree" (16). Following an altercation with the Head of the English Department, Gordon is dismissed. He returns to Toronto and mixes briefly and abortively with the Stalinites under the guise of the Social Problems Club. He then finds himself

becoming a Trotskyite, admittedly under the influence of Thelma, a beautiful, immature high school drop-out who quotes impressively her ideal revolutionary, Rosa Luxemburg. Saunders becomes engaged to Thelma and, as she expects him to be an impressive revolutionary, rides the freights to Vancouver to organize a Trotskyite cell in the West. Ultimately, however, the "comrades" and Toronto Bolshevik-Leninists go their separate, independent, and ironically capitalistic ways. When Saunders finally manages to arrange a group meeting after an unusual contact from the Marxist Mike Halloran, Saunders' cell is denounced by the new Toronto Marxist leader. Ironically the "Canadian Lenin", Leo Sather, the former Marxist leader, is now a "renegade" (258). The initial meeting of the Vancouver cell disperses after Gordon, as Paul Green, reads the new Toronto Marxist leader's letter. The police later raid Halloran's "chapel" (240); Gordon is warned of a "stool" (270); the "stool" is revealed as Bill Smith, Gordon's first and most trusted Vancouver comrade. Smith is pushed over the hotel railing by a fellow revolutionary, Fred Hughes, who then admonishes Gordon to resume his former name and life with the least possible hesitation. Under the auspices of Professor Channing, a socialist working quietly and competently in the "cozy academic world" (279) of the university, Gordon abandons the Marxists, leaves Vancouver, and returns to the

East. Here he finally receives the fellowship that enables him to study in England and complete his doctorate. In England, incidentally, he meets and marries his English wife Diane. Back in America once again as Dr. Saunders, the respected and highly competent university professor, his past ghosts of his activities of the thirties return to haunt him and ultimately to force him to the confrontation with the Senate Investigating Committee of the fifties, to whom he must now explain himself.

Guilt plays a major role in Saunders' life in Down the Long Table. While in Utah, Saunders carries on a clandestine affair with Anne Barton, the wife of an established Mormon professor. His love for her is insufficiently strong to allow his adoption of her two children and the birth of a third child almost certainly fathered by Saunders. Saunders later learns that Anne has died as a result of a suspected abortion which he, Gordon, had known of while in Utah and had tacitly agreed to by leaving the Mormon college and returning to Toronto. Echoing Crump, throughout the novel is the denunciation of Gordon made by the College's English Department Head: "Man of Sin!" (20). While with Anne at their last revelatory meeting the narrator writes of "a voice he had shut his ears to, a voice saying--what?/That you are still a mamma's boy, wanting love without marriage, afraid to grow up" (29-30). Just prior to

their parting, Gordon engages in semantic quibbling with himself:

What about yourself?--and you know he's [Anne's husband] not really that bad. He is, the pot-belly. Then why are you leaving him to her, making her kill the child that may be yours? Yours is the sin. It's no more a killing than contraception, I won't be caught in theological verbiage, there is no sin, only . . . Release from repression the cultivated mores? (32)

As the woman he professes to love leaves, Saunders' feeling is: "I have escaped" (33). Ironically, he never escapes the impression of Anne and the unborn child. He speaks of "a certain doctor . . . who will know my fetus face" (45). Beautiful inane Thelma becomes Anne's surrogate. Anne's image floats before him as he kneels fatuously before the temperamental Thelma, attempting to placate her (149). His own child by Diane is named Anne.

Anne's words "Meantime, perhaps, you will do great things" (32) echo unbidden throughout the pages of the novel. The "great things" initially take the form of politically unsubstantial endeavours, as the witless Thelma inadvertently points out in her illiterate epistle. The reader senses that the narrator, at once Gordon, Paul, and the professor of the fifties mentally re-living the experience, is painfully aware of the essential sadness in the irony of futile battle in the face of circumstances that ultimately time alone will alter.

Gordon Saunders' entrance into radical political

circles becomes the focus, for a few distorted months of his life, of the "great things" commissioned to him by Anne, who had ended her suggestion with the interrogative "Perhaps?" (32). His initiation into political circles is somewhat undistinguished. He inadvertently stumbles into a communist gathering in a Toronto park and, as a direct result of his "booing" what he considers to be police brutality, is commended by the revolutionary Stalinite communists. Just prior to his meeting the leather-jacketed Kay and her colleagues, Gordon is highly disturbed: "She [Anne] does not even write you. And you do not dare. What are you going to do then?" (59). What Gordon Saunders does is respond with almost pathetic gratitude to the commendation of "leather-jacket" (59) Kay. Birney's description of Saunders at that moment suggests the possible emotions the tourist persona in the later poetry might feel: "He was dumb, caught in a strange succession of emotions, deflation, self-laughter, caution, and then even an odd pride" (59). Saunders' desire to be accepted transcends all other wishes. He responds gratefully to obese Mrs. Zimchuk, who peers at him "like a fierce acquisitive mother". The inner voice prompts him: "These people want to be friends" (59). When invited to the weekly meeting, Anne's voice is juxtaposed against Saunders' own inner warning: "Say no, you fool" (67). The Gordon Saunders who wanders about ghost-ridden

and lonely during Toronto's bleak Sunday afternoon answers affirmatively.

Gordon's attempt to interpret the Communist Manifesto results in his being ousted from the Social Problems Club. Ironically, it is not only his abstruse political position that guarantees his ejection from the Club, but an implied relationship with Kay that fails to materialize to her satisfaction. Kay takes her cue from Roberts, the actual leader of the Social Problems Club. Sensing Roberts' obvious but silent displeasure with Gordon's treatise, the girl launches a scathing attack against Saunders. He is roundly denounced as a Trotskyite without having the vaguest notion of the implication: "Gordon (genuinely astonished): 'Am I? I didn't know'" (85). Through Kay, Saunders has become involved in and rejected from the Social Problems Club where, the reader can safely assume, he had hoped to annihilate the vision of Anne and to find companionship. Through Thelma he becomes an active Trotskyite, now using both Thelma and Trotskyism, or a "world cause", to crush his further sense of guilt arising from the information regarding Anne's death. Saunders' consistent motive for political immersion is a desire for love, for affection, for acceptance, and for the suppression of a real or imagined guilt. The irony rests in the fact that Gordon's faith in his desire to bring about an "island" (70) or world

socialistic state is grounded first in the adverse circumstances of an abortion and a death. Later, his political involvement is precipitated by an idealistic love for an obstinate, beautiful, puerile girl with a superficial intellect.

Gordon Saunders ventures into Vancouver as an avowed Trotskyite who has gratefully accepted the patronage of Leo Sather in Toronto. Sather's motives for allowing Saunders' entrance into the movement are not for the idealistic purposes of a world-saving socialism; he accepts Gordon merely to get him out of Toronto, away from Thelma, so that Sather himself may control the girl who is obviously not averse to Sather's advances. Again the total situation becomes highly ironic as the reader is given the banal motives behind Sather's idealistic veneer. The professor, or the narrator beginning and ending the body of the novel, in his mental recapitulation of the events, is also aware of the irony of the circumstances that so deluded him and now realizes the desperation of his wish at that time in his life to believe that his participation in the political movement would serve to define a place for him in his world.

Saunders' immersion in Vancouver Trotskyism reflects again his ironically confused motives. Images of Anne and Thelma appear and entangle themselves with the cause he has assumed, that of the creation of a better world, a socialist

movement designed to relieve Canada of the deadening effects of the Depression.

In Vancouver, Gordon Saunders assumes the alias Paul Green and registers along skid row in the Hotel Universe. The name of the hotel is itself pure irony: registered in the hotel are the "ground-floor aristocrats" (181) living in rooms with temperamental radiators and taps dribbling tepid water, and sharing one common toilet; the second floor, for two dollars a week, offers a single cold tap, bed and mattress, and the presence of "three slackbreasted anxious poxed old girls" (181) who persuade the aged and the lonely to pay what meagre portion they can for the prostitutes' favours; the top floor excludes taps, lights, chairs, and offers only a flat bed and urine-scented mattress complete with bedbugs. Gordon registers on the top floor (at one dollar a week); he registers on the floor whose inhabitants share the lowest class of economic status in the hotel. The hotel itself, by virtue of at least three economic divisions, reflects the very real fact of the world's economic condition.

Gordon feels that his choice of accommodation (admittedly necessitated by lack of funds) is admirably in keeping with his revolutionary stance, although he is professionally equipped to lecture at Wasatch college in the fall. That he will assume economic prestige of sorts a

short six weeks hence sharpens the irony of the role he chooses to play for the summer--as the revolutionaries Hansen and Hughes succinctly point out. Gordon is flirting with the conditions of the universe, trying to believe in a cause, trying to live as one of the unemployed "not only because he felt in truth now almost one of them but because he hoped to make some of them one with him" (183), and always with the security of the knowledge--although not overtly referring to it--that he has his friend Van Bome's letter concerning the Salt Lake teaching position.

The dramatic irony in the novel sharpens as the novel progresses. Chapters one and two, dealing with Dr. Gordon Saunders seated at the table ringed by the members of the Investigating Committee and containing within the room the Dean of Arts, the President of the University, "the heads of gentlemen and scholars" (1), prepare the reader for the dramatic irony of the era re-examined mentally by Dr. Saunders before he speaks. The reader knows from the outset the present position of Dr. Saunders--that of a man who has obtained the Degree, a position in the university, and a wife and child, a man who has achieved respect. Fleeting images, names and associations prepare for the revelatory chapters that follow. Roberts is recalled: "Roberts' cold face, that shabby inconsequential hawk. Is this his latest racket, to be in their pay?" (7).

Roberts, who divorced Saunders from the Toronto Stalinites, had been "careful all along not to call [Gordon] comrade" (66). The reader is prepared to meet Leo Sather who, to the naive and confused Gordon Saunders, once appeared as the overwhelming and formidable Toronto Marxist leader. Dr. Saunders' mental reaction when questioned about Sather is: "Christ, had those foolish forgotten letters survived?" (7). The name of Stephen McNamee, "onetime District Organizer for the Communist Party of Canada in the Pacific Coast Region" (7), engenders in the professor anger and the resulting refusal to answer questions. The fragments that dance mockingly through Saunders' mind (8) are elucidated in chapter twenty-six when McNamee harasses Paul Green in Vancouver's Victory Square, re-named the "Sun Parlor" (191). McNamee then denounced Saunders after deliberately baiting him: "In a couple of years . . . Mr. Paul Trotsky Green, we'll have a Workers' State of North America and you'll be one of the first to be stood up against a wall and shot. . . . And I hope to Christ I live to have the personal pleasure of helping to blow out your dirty brains" (216). The investigating Senator's final question in chapter one concerns Saunders' alias, Paul Green, and Green's membership in a communist organization. The present, the fifties, demands of Dr. Saunders that the professor "somehow fit into the map of the future" those "flecked waters" (10) of his

past.

In Toronto, in the thirties, Gordon Saunders is the naive political initiate. The images of the first two chapters suggest the dramatic irony that increases acutely as Saunders moves into the confused world of Gordon Saunders playing Paul Green in the West. The persona in Vancouver has some insights into his own character; nevertheless, he fails to come to a stable rationale as the basis for his actions. His dealings with the various revolutionaries, especially Smith, manifest a lack of insight. Generally, his own private interests govern his thought and actions.

Paul Green's objective in Vancouver is ostensibly to bring "at length to this whole weary globe that true socialism" (183) to regenerate man. Ironically, as it foreshadows the later words of the revolutionaries Hansen and Hughes, Saunders registers as Green, and "Paul Green he wanted to stay that summer" (183) (*italics mine*), assuming a persona to cover activities in which he indulges for a number of reasons. Depression regarding the state of mankind provides one motive. He questions the statement that "socialism, some kind of socialism, was the complete solution for all of man's man-made ills" (184). However, behind these "grandiose but surely not ignoble romanticisms", there is still the admitted "deliberate self-deception" (185); he was there largely because a girl he wished to love

wanted him to be there. Ultimately, Saunders assumes Paul Green's persona for the following reason:

Perhaps after all what had stung him had been only the ubiquitous wasps of every man's summer, the stabbing need to be heard and reckoned with, and to have followers and admirers, and to be judged valuable and wise, and to triumph or die in a good cause, and be loved, and above all to be forgiven. (185)

Gordon's sense of guilt reveals itself even in the initial use of his own alias. Meeting Bill Smith in the flophouse, Gordon, "feeling guilty in his own strange alias" (186), immediately suspects the authenticity of Smith's identity. He does, of course, maintain the alias, never daring a revelation of "Saunders" (other than the fact that he is a professor), and avoiding contact with former Vancouver associates. The one exception, prior to the near-breakdown with Professor Channing after the death of Smith, is Gordon's encounter with Channing in the bookstore. The encounter occurs, significantly, after McNamee's harassment of Paul Green in the Sun Parlor. That Gordon is assuming a persona is made explicit: "Perhaps his feet, he thought, would always, given their way, lead him back from forums to the world of books" (220). To Channing, Gordon reveals everything after telling himself he need reveal nothing to his former professor. And when Paul Green witnesses the death of Smith, and then reverts to Gordon Saunders in the presence of Hughes who dissuades him from going to the

police, it is to the bourgeois professor that Gordon returns for aid.

The Vancouver revolutionaries with whom the reader can sympathize, Ole Hansen and Fred Hughes, recognize Saunders for what he is--an actor playing a role out of mixed motives. Hansen is the brunt of a McNamee attack in Sun Parlor when Green first meets him. Hansen had been denounced as a liar and a Trotskyist for questioning changes in communist pamphlets and for noting the diverting of funds to raise the "expense accounts" (200) of Vancouver party leaders. Hansen is labelled a "police spy" (201) for questioning communist tactics. Fred Hughes is the leader of the senseless Relief Office raid, and one man who, despite his fanatical mental state, speaks out at the abortive meeting in Halloran's chapel: "Shut your stupid gobs. . . . Talk-talk-talk and never do nothin. Crocks and has-beens and goddam longhairs you are and that's all. . . . Revolution in the head it iss only, and treachery in the belly" (260). Hughes' comment that "Things are run by kids now, by little boyscout troops of rattin kids they are, bringin in the age of counter-revolution, of fascism" (263), pierces the tenuous facade with which Saunders has cloaked his activities.

The professor-narrator, as he appears occasionally in the novel, passes clues that make the reader aware of

Smith as the "stool". Out of refusal to see what is actually happening, Green or Saunders remains impervious to these clues. Hansen's distrust of Smith is made explicit by his inviting Paul Green to the Relief Office raid but excluding Smith, on Hughes' orders. Smith possesses tobacco and, on the occasion of fellowship, brings beer to Harry Dack's floathouse. Hansen's quiet questioning of the source of the beer and his refusal to participate in the revelry are clues for the reader, clues which Gordon fails to heed. That he fails to do so stems from his need to trust and to love his first Vancouver "comrade" despite, for example, the doubt he briefly entertains regarding Smitty's honesty in the case of Theda's missing ten dollars and Smith's subsequent drinking spree.

Saunders turns constantly to Smith in his Vancouver sojourn. Following his rejection by Hansen, and feeling that Smith needs companionship, "Gordon realized that he himself was in equal need of Smitty, the last of his comrades, and that it was only the bad news of the meeting [at Halloran's] which was making his feet lag". Bill Smith "would surely have defended Paul Green's position at every step. . . . For Smitty . . . had always been the most eager of the comrades for the growth of the organization" (269). The dramatic irony is the reader's suspicion of Smith and the reader's awareness that the narrator behind the personae

of Saunders and Green knows of Smith's betrayal; Paul Green or Gordon Saunders ironically places his trust in the man who works against him.

Saunders is not a revolutionary; he is an ordinary man in the 1930's destined ultimately to rejoin his rightful place in the world of academia. His summertime flirtation with radicalism, his rejection by more down-trodden yet more worldly-wise men such as Hansen, his clinging to the ashes of an essentially escapist emotion for Thelma--these place him in the ranks of ordinary men who strive, fail, crave affection, and desire the approval of their fellow human beings. Chapter thirteen concerns Saunders' first meal at the Barstows' where he tries desperately to profess a belief in Trotskyism. Again, as he does repeatedly in the novel, the narrator emphasizes Gordon's personal motives:

Or was it some need of his own to believe it?
--because to believe it was to fit himself at last
into a rolling and armored machine of ideas, and
move within it, a trusted and powerful soldier?

Looking back, he knew it had not been at all like this, had been neither simple nor intellectual, this capitulation of his mind to an idea. There had also been the two phantoms, turning still somewhere in the dark waters of his being, waiting then (as they would always wait) for the moment when he should once more be alone and marooned in the darkening gulf, waiting to twist their drowned faces toward him, staring with the gentle eyes of a woman already dead and the blind sockets of a baby never born. (123)

Saunders' sense of guilt never leaves; to Dr. Channing, when

Gordon's political career terminates, he verbalizes for the last time his guilt for Anne's death, although the memory will live with him always. The narrator (123) realizes that the twenty-eight-year-old Saunders, despite his tangled emotions, would have declared himself a man with rational motives, associating with dedicated people concerned with a cause. Yet even at that time there was

a Gordon Saunders who was already many people;
 who was a grown child drawn to willful children;
 a solitary man stung by the flesh and gnawed by
 the spirit; a pedant who was also an adventurer,
 swimming out to the most adventurous of all the
 world's pedantic utopias; a being of grandiose
 thoughts and microscopic cares, a blocked teacher,
 a reluctant martyr, and a self-betrayed poet.

(123)

Both Hansen and Hughes recognize the confusion in the mind of Saunders. Ole Hansen, following the dispersal of the group from the "Educational Institute" (254) at the back of Halloran's Grocery, realizes, to a degree at least, the type of man Gordon is: "You is yoost havin holiday. Purty soon you go back to be perfesser. Dat's where you belong. . . you iss good socialist, Paul, and good man tew. You help me tink, but you iss only summer-time rebel." Gordon's reaction is the "sense of being mocked, uselessly made a fool of" (267). Gordon's basic desire is for love and acceptance. To Ole he remarks: "I hope we're still friends." He immediately recognizes the remark as "fatuous" and remonstrates "Why can I never learn to be wary about

expecting human love?" (266). Yet this desire for human love is at the core of his being, a basis for all his activity, as he is shortly to admit to Dr. Channing. Hughes, too, instinctively knows Gordon. He states after Smith's death: "Listen, perfesser bach, you great dumb boy . . . you got a life ahead yet. Even another name ye've got . . . another life too you've got. But out of here you must go, now . . . and out of politics, man. Yer no goddam good at it at all" (276). Gordon's "Paul Green" mask fails completely with the spiritual revolutionaries, the ones ready to kill if necessary, as Hansen tells Gordon he, Gordon, is not (268). Neither Hansen nor Hughes ridicules Green; instead, they pierce his persona and force him out of the role he wants to believe in but uses largely for escapist reasons. The professor of the first two chapters realizes this irony; the reader is aware; whether or not the Investigating Committee will understand the ultimately sad irony of the condition of the Saunders of the 1930's remains unanswered in the novel.

Channing has the last glimpse of Paul Green. It is Gordon Saunders, the student and the professor, rather than the revolutionary Paul Green, who reaches the "staid suburban street" after the death of Smith. Significantly, the second sentence in chapter forty reads: "I have not been followed" (278). The "I" to emerge shortly will be Gordon Saunders,

once again the academic, attempting to exorcise the ghosts of the past six months dating from the "escape" from Anne and his unborn child.

In Channing's home Gordon thinks of Thelma (279) and Anne: "She was good to look upon, and seemed a warm-hearted wench" (280). To Gordon, Anne along with Smith is another "I helped to kill". Channing, of whom Saunders thinks, "I can trust this man, the petit-bourgeois" (280), re-directs Gordon's thinking. Channing's reaction to Gordon's confession of Smith's death and of Anne's abortion is that "[you are] a great bloody melodramatic fool . . . determined to martyr [yourself] out of an oldfashioned sense of sin" (283). Channing gives his reason for aiding his former student: "Because I love you, you damn young fool, because you've brains and education and character and have a chance to use them for the benefit of this ignorant and unhappy world" (285). Because of the professor's love for the student, the words are stronger than those of Hansen and Hughes, but the message parallels the counsel of the revolutionaries. As did Hansen and Hughes, Channing, the bourgeois socialist, insists on Gordon's forfeiting "Paul Green". Only in so doing, and in avoiding the possible merger of Gordon Saunders and Paul Green, will Saunders move back to the academic world where he can produce the most good and continue to "travel a little way with [men born of

the sun] toward the sun" (285).

References to Thelma and Jack Barstow heighten the dramatic irony of the political fiasco in which Paul Green had immersed himself. From Mrs. Barstow's letter, Gordon learns of Thelma's running off with Leo Sather and their having "given up politics because Leo [has] a big new job with this firm hes been working for" (249). Jack Barstow claims that "I'll be cleaning up in Wall Street yet" (252) following his marriage to the daughter of the owner of Imperial Motors. The reader, and certainly Dr. Saunders in his recapitulation of the past, see the Saunders of the 1930's not as ignorant or ludicrous but as an ironically duped person of a desperate time. His political venture was doomed to collapse; in retrospect the facts seem absurd. Nevertheless, his later assertion to the former Comrade Bagshaw, now a "Mrs. Somebody or other" (292), who tells him he is not drowning and that he will not turn back, is that "I will never turn back and I dont regret whatever swimming I did" (293). The two-hundred-pound materialistic Jack Barstow, meeting Saunders in the second year of the war, dismisses in a mood of levity the situation Gordon endorsed so intensely in the Trotskyite days: "Hard to remember what bloody fools we were, isn't it? Romantic as all get out. Still, we had a lot of fun" (296). Even before adopting the Vancouver alias, Gordon admits that

he had sensed, before ever he had set his foot on the rung of the freight in the Toronto yards, that the game was somehow false, that he was being sent away into dark woods to hide with no certainty that, while his hands were over his eyes, the other children would not drift away, forget him, and begin a new sport. (185)

Dr. Saunders, recalling the character of Gordon Saunders alias Paul Green, cannot but engender within the reader a sense of sadness for fallible humanity.

The narrative method that Birney uses in Down the Long Table anticipates the change that occurs in the writing of the later travel poetry where he adopts the guise of the tourist persona. The novel does suggest that Birney faces the problem of a persona. Although Gordon Saunders is immersed in situations that parallel closely the life of the author, Saunders is certainly not a consistently true persona for Birney himself. Through Saunders, Birney presents, of course, aspects of himself; but, because he employs a number of personae for his protagonist, a true persona for the poet is difficult, if not impossible, to detect. The several approaches to his narrator in Down the Long Table point to the fact that the author's narrative method is in the process of change.

In the Vancouver chapters, Birney variously refers to Gordon Saunders and Paul Green, although for the most part "Saunders" is used. For example, while registering in the Worker's International Relief, the narrator writes of

the youth who takes Gordon's information: "He [the desk clerk] unfroze sufficiently to take Paul's address" (204). Chapter twenty-eight, dealing with Hughes' police-inflicted scalp wound, begins: "Late the next morning, Paul Green and Ole Hansen carried into the former's room a man dripping from a scalp-wound". In chapter twenty-six the narrator states: "The Trotskyite label was indeed thoroughly and publicly pinned on Paul Green by McNamee" (215). Chapter thirty-eight repeats the dialogue technique employed in chapter eight where Saunders, as Gordon Saunders, reads his interpretation of the Communist Manifesto. Listed among the "Persons" is the name of "Green". During the course of the dialogue, Saunders' persona is both "Green" and "Gordon". He is "Green" when he reads the refusal of the Toronto cell to accept the Vancouver branch, and he is "Gordon" when he abjectly tries to hold together some fragments of unity within the group Halloran has invited him to help organize. The contention that Birney's novel anticipates the later adoption of the persona is strengthened not only by the interplay of "Saunders" and "Green", but by the occasional lapses into the first person: "antemortem on me? I wonder if--" (1); "I have not been followed" (278). This interplay illustrates Birney's confrontation of several personae for his protagonist. Ultimately the poet does choose one mask--his tourist narrating in the first person--

through which to present his impressions of his surroundings. The novel, then, with the masks of Saunders and Green, and the interjection of the personal "I", demonstrates to the reader that the poet faces the difficulties of a possible persona, and a consequent change in his method of narrating his vision of man's world.

Various characteristics of the later persona are found in the character of Gordon Saunders. As does the persona in the travel poems, Saunders exhibits both a sense of guilt and a desire for love and acceptance. His whole involvement in Marxist circles stems from a desire for love and acceptance by humanity. As will be illustrated in the following chapter, this wish for the love of and acceptance by man emerges poignantly through the persona in poems such as "Cartagena de Indias" (1963) and "For George Lamming" (1962). A sense of guilt is prominent as well in these and other poems of the sixties. In "Meeting of Strangers" (1962), for example, the persona speaks:

White man tourist surrogate yes
but not guilty enough to be skewered in the guts for it
(SP, 56).

Saunders' fear of mockery, of being "uselessly made a fool of" (267), also characterizes the later persona as he takes great care not to incur the scorn of the strangers he visits. Another interesting admission Saunders makes to Channing, in addition to that of his need for love and

stability (283), is his continuing belief in social change: "I still hate exploitation and stupidity, and armament races. . . . I want to fight whatever devils breed human poverty, insanity, war and death" (283-284). Throughout Down the Long Table Gordon attempts to establish a working-class status--stressing, for example, his father's picking up nuggets on the river bank--so as not to be identified with bourgeois money and status. He tends to exhibit guilt at having claims to money, fearing, perhaps, the scorn of his "comrade" revolutionaries. The later persona displays the same sort of guilt for his moderate economic status, feeling that his money contributes to the misery of the strangers he meets. The persona in "Cartagena de Indias", for example, is acutely aware of "a hotel room all to myself/with a fan and a box of Vitamin C" (SP, 61). As does Saunders, the later persona desires "human acceptance"--but not through money.

A major difference between the novel and the later travel poems is that, in the travel poems, the reader can step into the shoes of the tourist persona and experience his emotions, while in Saunders' case, the audience stands back as witnesses to Saunders' actions and reactions. In the travel poems the reader tends to empathize with the persona of the tourist, and the irony of these poems thus becomes much more personal. The Dr. Saunders who narrates

Down the Long Table uses variously the personae of Gordon Saunders and Paul Green, both of whom the reader views from a distance. The reader sympathizes with the professor of the fifties and the confused "summertime rebel" of the thirties, but does not truly detect in the novel a persona with whom he can identify. Nevertheless, the novel indicates that a persona with definite characteristics might play a major role in Birney's subsequent method of narration. In this novel, then, Birney's persona is as yet not fully developed. When considering the persona of the travel poems in the next chapter, it will be demonstrated that this persona is such a strongly identifiable mediary between the poem and the reader that the reader can both sympathize and empathize with this personality as he wanders about foreign countries, seeking the approval of humanity that Gordon Saunders wishes in Down the Long Table.

CHAPTER IV

TRAVEL POETRY OF THE FIFTIES AND SIXTIES

Upon completion of Down the Long Table in 1955, Birney travelled in Mexico. Then, during the 1958-59 academic year, his travels took him west to Hawaii, Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, and London. The poems subsequently written appeared in the 1962 volume Ice Cod Bell or Stone. In 1962-63 Birney toured Mexico again, then the West Indies, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Greece, Spain, and London. His impressions of these travels appear in the 1964 volume Near False Creek Mouth. The series of travel poems that Birney wrote during the late fifties and early sixties are well defined in space and time either through the titles themselves or through such addenda as "Kyoto and Hong Kong 1958" that appear at the end of "A Walk in Kyoto". Both the titles of the various poems and their addenda suggest that these poems are, in fact, a type of record of the poet's journey's at that time in his life.

The effects of these travels appear to have released in Birney's poetry those latent tendencies already detected in poems such as "David" and the verse play Trial of a City and in the novel Down the Long Table, where he worked with the various personalities of Bobby and David, P. S. Legion,

Mrs. Anyone, and company, and Gordon Saunders. Down the Long Table, with the interplay of the personalities of Saunders, Green, and the intrusion of the personal "I", suggests the poet's awareness of the difficulties encountered in assuming one viable poetic voice through which to render his impression of the world. Finally, in the travel poems, Birney does adopt one mask, that of the Canadian tourist visiting foreign lands. The protagonist in Down the Long Table prepared the way for the mask of the later poetry in that he was a fallible human being experiencing a situation sharply located in historical events, in a specific space and time. Birney, however, did not depict the character of Saunders in such a manner that the reader could step into Gordon Saunders' shoes and experience his sensations. The major reason for the reader's lack of empathy is Birney's narrative technique. Indicated in the interchangeable use of Saunders and Green is, perhaps, the author's own confusion as he found himself confronting directly, in a natural setting, a person with whom he must deal and to whom he must assign a credible character that might also serve as his own artistic mask.

Birney's travels, following his depiction of Gordon Saunders, produced a number of poems illustrating the poet's choice of a voice through which he could describe conditions of mankind as he viewed them. During his travels, the

poet's official job was to give readings of Canadian poetry in various colleges he visited. But, as Richard Robillard notes in his discussion of Birney's travel poems,

the tourist overwhelms the official and assumes many roles: the amused listener for native hucksters; the reflective and, at times, self-conscious foreigner; the joyous discoverer of large myths, writ small or big in what he sees, the lonely, irritated, appealing, ironic, patronizing, thankful, frightened, humble man. Despite the many personae in these poems, one comes to feel, reading them, that Birney has finally recorded his own voice, his own sensibility.¹

Robillard speaks of "the many personae in these poems"; through all of them, the reader can detect the voice of the poet himself. The various personae are extensions in some poems, or restricted aspects in other poems, of the one figure that dominates this travel poetry; that is, the character of the ingenuous, kindly, confused, searching tourist who initially fails to achieve the human contact that will render his journey memorable. The narrator illustrated in "A Walk in Kyoto" is a model of Birney's fully developed persona on an unconscious quest; the persona knows that he is seeking human contact, but does not realize that his search has the nature of a quest, for he can detect no pattern in his seemingly pointless wanderings. Only when the human contact is made do the formerly cold symbols of the foreign culture suddenly assume meaningful significance and engender within both the tourist and the reader

listening, so to speak, to the tourist speaker a poignant sense of human warmth or a sensation of universal fellowship.

The poems "Bangkok Boy" and "The Bear on the Delhi Road", both dated 1958, portray a somewhat restricted version of the persona and are, in a sense, preparatory poems for those spoken directly to the reader by the fully depicted tourist-narrator of "A Walk in Kyoto". The two poems are written by a third-person observer, the tourist, who views man's immediate situation and is confronted with the truth behind superficial appearances. This third-person observer is the persona of "A Walk in Kyoto" or "Cartagena de Indias", although he is not nearly as finely defined.

In "Bangkok Boy" the tourist observes the innocent and happy child dancing in the street. The boy is told to

Prance this
dazzled instant
...
before in the high world's clumpings
you are caught slid lethewards
on choleric canals to where the poles of klongs
and rows of paddyfields are shaped
to bend small leaping backs
and the flat bellies of impets
are rounded with beriberi (SP, 13).

The tourist exhorts the boy to

for
all gods' sakes beat
out that first
last cry
of joy under
the sun! (SP, 13)

In the poem, the narrator speaks as one acutely and painfully aware of the child's pending fate, the debilitation and misery that will follow his innocent, happy, uninhibited childhood. The reality of the child's economically poor country will ultimately destroy the happy innocence of the child and replace the joyous perception of his world with disease and hunger. The narrator can envision the two extremes of the life of this child but is powerless to do more than to drop a few coins into the boy's hand. The child views the coins as little more than a new delight, possibly something "bright/strange cold" with which momentarily to amuse himself. In fact, that is truly all that the tourist's few coins can do, for they will not, of course, change the nature of the boy's pending adult hardships. The reader and the speaker are fully and helplessly cognizant of this fact.

The reader senses that the narrator, throughout the poem, searches for some connection between the child and the narrator's disinterested tourist companions. Birney's description of his speaker, that of "this strayed towering/tourist", suggests, by virtue of the word "strayed", that this speaker is searching for the right path, or the right means of achieving some contact with the humanity he visits. He feels guilty: he contrasts the luxury of the hotel for his people with the "choleric canals" which are the boy's

destiny in the country which the narrator's fellow tourists tour dutifully and superficially. The sole means of communication is not a shared delight as it is in, for example, "A Walk in Kyoto", where the tourist and the maid concomitantly found joy in the simple pleasure of observing the boy's kite. In "Bangkok Boy", all that the speaker can do to communicate, in a highly restricted sense, is helplessly to drop the "bright/strange cold.../coin in [the boy's] small paws" (SP, 12). The money is merely a novelty to the boy; he has no conception of either its meaning or of the tourist's motives in giving him this new toy. The narrator is left to return to the reality of his luxury hotel knowing that he can do nothing to prevent the child's first "cry of joy" from diminishing as the child's inevitable awareness of the harshness of economic deprivation increases.

The situation of "Bangkok Boy" illustrates a type of personal irony. Although the speaker is a third person reporter of the scene, he is a sympathetic member of humankind with whom the reader can, if he chooses, empathize. Because he is a tourist with whom one may identify, rather than one who only stands back and observes (as in the case of Gordon Saunders), the irony of the narrator's situation in "Bangkok Boy" becomes highly personal, as it does, in fact, in the entire series of travel poems.

Further irony rests in the depiction of the

impersonal tourists. The narrator describes his fellow tourists as returning

to that spireless palace where god-tall
in their chalked goblin-faces all tourists
return to plod in pairs like water-buffalo
by a bare hotel pool to their funeral music (SP, 13).

These moderately wealthy tourists are bored and disinterested; they are there because it is the thing to do if one has sufficient money to travel. Their money, rather than stimulating them as it allows them ostensibly to broaden their understanding of their world, brings boredom, heat, and fatigue. They become featureless "chalked goblin-faces"; they tend to lose, in their pursuit of new ventures, their human qualities and are reduced to "[plodding] in pairs like water-buffalo". In ironic contrast, the poor Bangkok child dances, "makes a jig up", laughs, and skips about while the economically secure tourists dutifully

worship [a fresco] in a regalia
of cameras pacing out their grave
measures along the enormous stone-still god (SP, 12).

The tourists see only the superficial aspects of the symbols of the strange culture; they do not pierce below the external surface to the minds that created the symbols; the best they can do is to record their fleeting impressions on film.

They see only cold and impersonal monuments as they, in no way whatsoever, achieve the human contact that can transform the cold monuments and palaces into significant symbols.

The child's dance means nothing to them; they are left

"pacing out their grave/measures" as they divorce the reality of the people in this strange land from the symbols that identify the culture.

"The Bear on the Delhi Road" (SP, 14) strongly delineates Birney's vision of the ironic discrepancy between what man wishes to believe of his immediate world, and what is the reality. The tourist has been led to believe that both the Kashmir men and the dancing bear take a natural joy in their activity. What men have created is the myth of the happy, naturally dancing bear. What they have divorced from this myth, of course, is the reality of harshness, pain, heat and dust that precedes the end-product, the bear on the city streets. The tourist admits

It is not easy to free
myth from reality (SP, 14).

The irony is the reality behind the facade created for the tourists' pleasure. To pierce this facade presupposes the experience of painful recognition for the tourist, and this is something a visitor would normally avoid if possible. The process is not "easy"; it would be simpler, easier to drift along with a superficial, external aspect of a strange cultural symbol, such as the dancing bear, than to confront or admit the reality behind this phenomenon. Ironically, the tourist observing the men and the bear on the way to the city, cannot separate completely the hot, dusty scene he witnesses from the picture he has in his mind of the bear

dancing in the streets of New Delhi. The torturous progress of the men and the bear that the tourist views with discomfort from the relative luxury of his bus creates an impression that he cannot excise from his mind. The attempt to reconcile the two antithetical impressions of the bear--the hounded creature on the hot road and the ostensibly joyous, dancing creature of the carnival--gives rise to pain. Again, "It is not easy to free/myth from reality"; the scene witnessed on the road to Delhi will intrude on the tourist's consciousness if ever he is later expected to take delight in the phenomenon of a bear trained to entertain men.

Taking the bear from his natural surroundings to perform an unnatural dance for the pleasure of men is the livelihood of the Kashmir men. Ironically the dance, the traditional symbol of spontaneity or joy, here becomes a dance of necessity and endurance for both man and beast. If the dance is an unnatural horror for the bear, it is "no more joyous for [the Kashmir men]/in this hot dust to prance/out of reach of the praying claws". The tourist observes: "They are peaceful both these spare/men of Kashmir"; ironically, life forces them to use cruel coercive methods to eke out their existence. However, they do not see the ring in the bear's nose, or the stick flicked at the bear, as cruel measures, as does the tourist observer. The

ring, the stick, and their unceasing, almost tranced gyrating about the bear are requisite symbols of their means to produce a further symbol, the dancing bear, for their country's visitors.

Throughout the poem Birney sustains the deadly contrast between the implied end-product, the happily entertaining bear, and the reality of the heat and dust and dogged determination that precedes that future phenomenon. The reader, through the consciousness of the narrator, is drawn into that atmosphere of poverty, heat, dust and, since the bear is the "living" of the Kashmir men, necessary cruelty. The poet uses the word "tranced" to link the worlds of man and beast. The bear has his "tranced/wish" to remain in his natural environment; he is taken to the world of man to join the "tranced dancing of men"--the world where men act not out of natural inclination but out of economic necessity. The conclusions of both "The Bear on the Delhi Road" and "Bangkok Boy" echo the essential sadness of the human condition. In "Bangkok Boy" the child's first cry of joy will be his last as his awareness of reality increases; in "The Bear on the Delhi Road" the narrator reduces man's joyous dance to a "lurch" which then becomes the "tranced dancing of men" trapped in a haze of poverty.

In both "Bangkok Boy" and "The Bear on the Delhi Road" Birney focuses directly on individual human beings and

draws the reader into the situation of the poems through the reporting of an immediate occurrence. Through the method of the narration, the reader sympathizes with the depicted human situation; but the reader still cannot empathize fully with the tourist narrator, for he is not, in these poems, personally identified. In "For George Lamming", dated "Kingston, Jamaica 1962", the persona does emerge strongly and the reader is drawn into both sympathy and empathy not only with the situation but with the emotions of the first-person narrator.

In "For George Lamming" the persona recalls a party "above Kingston Town" where he experienced "sudden friendship/wanted undeserved". In this travel poem the tourist speaks confidentially to the reader:

To you
I can risk words about this (SP, 52).

The reader is invited to participate in the experience narrated by the tourist mask of the poet, and to empathize with the intimate emotions voiced by this mask. In contrast to "The Bear on the Delhi Road" and "Bangkok Boy", the narrator is a first-person speaker revealing definite character traits about himself. He is Birney's fully developed persona desiring friendship and identification with men, greatly moved by expressions of acceptance by others, experiencing guilt, and expressing humility.

In the situation recalled, the persona attends a party with five or six black couples "linked singing/more

than rum happy". The medium bringing about the friendship and the strong identification with the denizens of the strange city is the spontaneity of the dance. The tourist forgets his "self" as he responds with the Jamaicans to the "laughter in dance". The persona then experiences that which gives to his venture the significance which ensures its warm remembrance. To speak of the occasion is to "risk" words that may or may not convey the poignancy of that moment in the persona's lifetime. What the tourist suddenly realizes is that he has been on a quest for human contact and that the goal of this quest is in the process of being realized:

I was giddy
 from sudden friendship
 wanted undeserved (SP, 52).

Abruptly jolted by his own face reflected in a mirror--"my face assaulted me"--the persona is assailed by a feeling of the collective guilt of the white man for his role in suppressing economically inferior races.² He feels that he does not deserve the free expressions of friendship. At that moment the white man's historic position is reversed to that of inferiority to the black people. The persona likens his own face pejoratively to "a white snail" in contrast to the beauty of the "supple dark flowers" or the "black tulip faces" of the dancing Jamaicans. They, the Jamaicans, are free, vibrant, and uninhibited while the white tourist

becomes inhibited, incapable of self-expression, colourless. The position in which the persona finds himself brings about, as Birney writes, a "sudden moment of curious exaltation and humility".³

The black strangers accept unreservedly the white man. Ironically, the white tourist is not prepared to accept the black people without first admitting an acute awareness of the differences between himself and those strangers with whom he finds himself interacting. It is, however, the admission of the difference between his white face and the black beautiful faces surrounding him that produces the moment of insight when the persona experiences, as did the persona in "A Walk in Kyoto" when he exchanged smiles with the maid, a human contact which transcends the strangeness of colour and culture. The persona is moved to gratitude and humility:

Always now I move grateful
 to all of you
 Who let me walk thoughtless
 and unchallenged
 in the gardens
 in the castles
 of your skins (SP, 52).

To "walk" in the personae of racially diverse peoples, to feel the warmth of identification with them, and to feel the affection that people can afford other people impels a sense of ultimate achievement for Birney's poetic mask.

"Cartagena de Indias" (SP, 59-63), dated "Colombia

1962-63", follows the format of "A Walk in Kyoto". The persona in "Cartagena de Indias" finds himself out of place in the city and unable to comprehend the people. He wanders about, dissatisfied, uncomfortable, and essentially sad. The contrast between his moderate wealth and the poverty and deprivation he witnesses (a contrast absent in "A Walk in Kyoto") destroys any anticipated enjoyment of foreign travel. Again, as in "A Walk in Kyoto", the search for human contact takes place initially in the commercialized streets of the ancient city. The tourist fails to realize, until Birney deftly reverses the trend of the poem towards the end, that his desired communication is not found in the surface civilization which the city assumes of necessity to sustain its people. The persona reaches his goal--a means of identification and fellowship with the people--when his money is forgotten and his attention focuses on a symbol beloved by the city's inhabitants.

Birney clearly identifies his mask. In the second verse paragraph the tourist voices the economic differences between himself and the citizens of the city:

but all the eyes accuse me back and say

There are only two races here:
 we human citizens
 who are poor but have things to sell
 and you from outer space
 unseasonable our one tourist
 but plainly able to buy (SP, 59).

The persona finds himself uncomfortably alienated from these people, an invader from "outer space". Birney's mask attributes to the poor the phrase "human citizens" while, ironically, he views himself, in his relatively affluent state, as a non-human invader from another world. There is no fellowship in Cartagena de Indias for the persona; in the eyes of deprived people the invader is the incarnation of the discrepancy between the rich and the poor. As such, the poet's mask initially experiences only flagrant hostility in the city. His visit is an "invasion"; he speaks of his first "retreat"; he is "hemmed by a Congo drum man"; his ignorance is taken advantage of as he is easily "short-changed". In the Indio market he finds a brief, unsatisfactory respite from hostility: "I am granted an uneasy truce". He senses that the natives' silent wish is simply:

Tall one tall as a demon
pass O pass us quickly (SP, 60).

As the persona in "A Walk in Kyoto" is prone to "stalk awkward" in the Japanese city, so the tourist in Cartagena de Indias must "clump unmaimed/in [his] bright shoes" down the city's streets. The persona in Kyoto searches for the "simple song of man"; the persona in Cartagena de Indias, wishing desperately to delete the hostility overtly displayed by the strange people, expresses much the same wish:

Somewhere there must be another bridge
 from my stupid wish
 to their human acceptance (SP, 60).

The persona's quest is for human contact. In the course of his observations of the city, he can detect no pattern leading to his goal. Everything he does appears to be meaningless. His words convey sadness and frustration with the human condition:

but what can I offer--
 my tongue half-locked in the cell
 of its language--other than pesos (SP, 60).

He must discover a "bridge" other than his money to transmit to these people his desire for "human acceptance". However, the present civilization he witnesses seemingly demands only his money. In this poem, the tourist's awareness of economic impoverishment provides a major theme. Instead of the animated, vital native the tourist expects to meet, he is exposed to the debilitated and desperate native under the influence of western civilization: "a Congo man in jeans/... bares a brace of Swiss watches/whispers in husky Texan" (SP, 59). The contrast between the present and past civilization is cruel:

a poxed and slit-eyed savage
 pouts an obscenity
 offering a sister
 as he would spit me
 a dart from a blowpipe (SP, 60).

Everywhere the persona meets depravity and corruption and physical deformity:

I step to the beautiful slave-built bridge
 and a mestiza girl
 levels Christ's hands at me
 under a dangling goitre (SP, 60).

Only the tourist's "bright shoes" and his "box of Vitamin C" keep him from contact with "hookworm/lockjaw and snakebite". The passionate life of "wine and sweet blood" of the city's past history has given way to the impersonal neutrality of a "sennet of taxi horns". Such superficial, misleading symbols of progress as "Old Golds" (SP, 59) cigarettes, "coffee and standard oil", and a "pavane of commerce" (SP, 61) are juxtaposed with such illustrative inhabitants of the modern city as "desperate tarantula youths" (SP, 59), "old crones of thirty" (SP, 60), and "gaunt mulatto ladies" (SP, 61).

The persona, then, finds himself initially lost as he wanders about painfully aware of the shifting interaction of the superficial facade of modern progress with the fierce poverty and debilitation of the people he encounters on the city's streets. Nowhere can he discover, apparently, the key to reconcile the two visions through some form of human contact. The turning point in the poem occurs when the fatigued and hopeless persona inadvertently stumbles upon a bewildering phenomenon:

I come routed now scuffling
 through dust in a nameless square
 treeless burning deserted
 come lost and guiltily wakeful
 in the hour of siesta
 at last to a message

to a pair of shoes (SP, 61).

A concrete monument, a pair of shoes ten feet long, is the townspeople's tribute to their native poet Luis Lopez. Forgetful of self in his excitement, the persona approaches the remote and "sad taxi men" (SP, 62) who suddenly become human, eager, and proud. Animatedly they explain the plaque and the poet who criticized them; the poet who wrote that the city was one of "rancid disarray" but who, the cabbies explain,

come to say one nice thing
 only one ever about us
 He say we inspire that love a man has
 for his old shoes (SP, 62).

In gratitude for this "one nice thing" that engenders within the inhabitants their sense of personal pride and gives them identification as significant human beings, they have created this monument to their poet.

The persona breaks the hostile barriers of the immediate natural setting--here the money-oriented city--in the moment of insight when he realizes the human love the townspeople have for their poet. They are proud of the love their poet had for them; they will willingly, openly, and eagerly speak of this love to the stranger who expresses

sincere interest in what gives to the people their personal pride. Through the persona's expressed interest in and the townspeople's explanations of the monument to the dead poet, the tourist finds the key, the human contact, that gives to the city's symbols and his seemingly pointless wanderings that significance which will keep the city personally alive in his memory. Again, as in Kyoto, the persona experiences that bond of fellowship with hitherto strange people when he forfeits the commercialism of the streets and focuses, quite by accident, on the city's one common symbol of identification, pride, and love. Birney replaces the coldness and alienation of the first part of the poem with a sense of love for humanity. For Birney's mask, then, man is everywhere the same: simple love for and fellowship with man cannot be suffocated by commercialism and materialism. The persona is able to say:

Discarded queen I thought I love you too
Full of rancid disarray
city like any city (SP, 63).

Of those inhabitants by whom he formerly felt threatened and who precipitated within the persona sensations only of fear, discomfort, and disillusionment, he now states:

I love the whole starved cheating
poetry-reading lot of you most of all
for throwing me the shoes of deadman Luis
to walk me back into your brotherhood (SP, 63).

In both "A Walk in Kyoto" and "Cartagena de Indias" the reader empathizes with the persona, experiencing with

him his sensations of alienation and uneasiness and his essential sadness at the wretchedness of the conditions he is witness to. The reader may see the persona as awkward, even ludicrous at times, but the reader always sees the persona sympathetically. The reader has an awareness of a pattern in the persona's actions that is denied to the tourist until, in retrospect, following his inadvertent stumbling upon human contact, he can look back and realize that formerly meaningless symbols indeed now have a significant place in his memories. For Birney's mask, love for and contact with humanity are found ultimately in the simplicity of common symbols that people will share with strangers willing to look at and listen to what is of importance to their sense of identification as individual persons.

The travel poems have one common, usually unexpressed theme that is voiced in the poem "Transistor" (SP, 53-55). The persona, in his travels, searches for the key to sympathetic human contact. Essentially, what he searches for is an understanding between himself and the strangers he encounters, and a way somehow to transcend the barriers imposed by different cultures. He does this by observing foreign cultural symbols and then, unexpectedly, by focusing on one object that has endured as a symbol of universal understanding; that is, a symbol that engenders within

racially and culturally diverse peoples a common bond of human warmth. In "Transistor", Birney's mask clearly expresses the ultimate goal of the tourist's travels.

The persona in "Transistor" is visiting the mountains in Jamaica, and stops briefly at a mountain guesthouse no longer frequented by visitors. He is with a group of people including a local engineer, the engineer's secretary, and the secretary's boyfriend. The keeper of this ancient guesthouse is a small, ancient Jamaican woman with a powerful singing voice. On this mountain, remote from civilization, the old woman has never been exposed to the symbols of modern man: "Today was the first she'd seen a transistor/and she'd stared at that more with fear/than interest" (SP, 53). Her fear subsides, however, when she begins to sing those songs that are her heritage:

The narrow high-ceilinged room was a box
resounding with all the mourning of loves
and deaths the fear of Mamba hope of Jesus (SP, 54).

Prior to the woman's forgetting both herself and the tourist in her song, the tourist himself feels acutely the difference between an ancient way of life embodied in the tiny Jamaican woman and the atmosphere of the modern world suggested not only by the jeep, the transistor, the giggling "steno" and her boyfriend, but by his own presence:

Yet mine was a new face
 with the colour to make anyone wary
 up in these mountains
 So she stood poised for reversal
 back to the caretaker's role
 But she soon forgot me [the engineer] too
 as her mind unravelled to airs (SP, 54).

The ancient broom becomes her modern microphone; the rum offered by the engineer is her audience's tribute to her song. Her tiny personage assumes all the dignity of a great performer. The tourist and the ancient woman assume roles contrary to what might be normally expected. Rather than his being ministered to in the usual manner by the caretaker of this forsaken guesthouse, the tourist sits silent and astounded as he is granted the privilege of listening to the chronicle of history sung so forcefully by this dignified woman who shies away from any form of gratitude other than the silent offering of the rum. At the end of this singular and overwhelming performance, the Jamaican does revert to her customary role, but not before, as the tourist states, she toasts the health of the tourist and "that of all the gentlemen of my nation/with all the dignity of hers" (SP, 55). It is then that Birney's mask voices the theme, or the goal, of his tourist's quest in all his travel; some local children have been listening to the transistor radio:

It was only then I let my ear tell me
 there'd been a counter bass going on all along
 Out on the dusty porch I found the young pair
 sitting on the rail at the farthest corner
 Two faces black and anxious

leant together under the transistor
They'd found a nail in a pillar to hang it by
The morning disc spin from Puerto Rico
was sending a Hollywood cowboy
from last year's Parade
The machine swung his voice from shriek
to silence and back

I suppose they'd been listening to him
as exclusively as I to her
and out of just as much need
to exchange our pasts (SP, 55).

Through this tourist mask, then, Birney's ultimate message
is to "exchange our pasts", to understand all people as much
as possible, and, through whatever conducive medium
available, to communicate on a warmly human, personal basis
with people different from himself.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Birney's first-person tourist persona provides a mask that voices Birney's own sentiments and became the filter through which he rendered a picture of himself in relation to situations he encountered in his travels during the fifties and sixties. This study, it must be stressed, has sought to define one area of Birney's work; there are, of course, many other approaches to his work. The value in tracing the change in Birney's narrative method to the adoption of the tourist persona is that it serves to define the place of Down the Long Table in Birney's canon. But the most important rendition of the persona is the tourist of the South American poems, an importance due to the strong moral theme that underlies the tourist's wanderings in economically poor countries.

In addition to this presentation of the persona, Birney uses first-person narration in various other ways. In the series of poems narrated by the first person in the fifties and sixties, there is a group of poems whose first-person narrator is decidedly not the poet himself. The narrators in these poems are usually bigots, insensitive to the reality of the situations around them. In "The

Toronto Board of Trade goes abroad" (NFCM, 23),¹ for example, Birney presents an inebriated business man, a member of the Toronto Board of Trade that is meeting in the "Union Club, Santiago de Chile, October 1962". This confused narrator attempts to engage a disgusted fellow member in conversation and, in the process, is thoroughly satirized by his own imperceptive and drunken statements. To this Canadian, the Chileans are untrustworthy on the grounds that they do not speak English and that they serve unfamiliar food and drink. Birney satirizes some Canadians abroad through this persona who does not see the reality of the visited country and who fails to see the strangers as human individuals. Through another poem in this series, "Billboards Build Freedom of Choice", "(billboard on Oregon coastal highway)", Birney satirizes American progress as blatantly advertised on billboards. The narrator here is an ignorant member of lower middle-class America who reacts strongly to the messages on billboards, but who, in his reaction, shows a considerable measure of narrow-minded bigotry.

In Birney's two recent volumes of the seventies dealing with his trip to Australasia, the poet's narrator changes somewhat in response to his surroundings. In what's so big about green? concerning the poet's travels to Australia, the persona at times approximates the narrator of

the South American poems; on the whole, however, the situation for the persona in these travels is different from that of the earlier travels in that there is not the poverty witnessed as there was in South America. While the Australian persona is clearly identified as Birney himself, he takes two forms: the poet-academic giving poetry readings, and the tourist travelling through strange lands, again uncertain of what he might find. The themes of the poems differ with the surroundings, of course, and Birney's persona in this Australian poetry is, in a sense, more restricted in his expression of emotion. He is still the curious, sensitive tourist, but he does not experience the guilt and misery that are so prominent in, for example, "Cartagena de Indias".

The poems depicting the travelling academic poet are totally autobiographical in that sense. The narrator is obviously Birney, but he is Birney's comic self. In "today's your big public reading", for example, the poet describes a day of poetry reading at an Australian college. The day becomes essentially a comical endurance test as the poet voices his mounting frustration with this academic venture. The second type of persona in this volume is again the tourist, exploring aspects of Australia. In "the 21st century belongs to the moon" the persona finds himself in a small Australian town in the Outback. He likens the land-

scape to that of the moon, remote and desolate. Ironically, this town, rather than progressing with time to a more advanced state of civilization, is fated to regress in the twenty-first century to a state of no civilization, to a state where the observer will witness only the deserted landscape associated with the moon. The persona here simply makes observations about what he sees; he does not make intimate contact with the people. He is in a country whose economic situation does not compel sensations of guilt arising from the persona's sense of his higher economic status than that of the people whose country he is visiting. The persona is more curious about the external aspects of the town, rather than with making contact with the people.

These suggested extensions of Birney's use of the persona complete this study of the poet's mask. The persona of the South American poems remains the most interesting in that he gives expression to a wide scope of intimate emotions. The development of this self-conscious, kindly, well-meaning tourist, searching for human contact amongst strangers, is a highly intriguing aspect of Birney's work.

NOTES

Chapter I

¹Richard Robillard, Earle Birney (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1971), p. 8.

²Paul West, "Earle Birney and the Compound Ghost", Canadian Literature, 13 (1962), 7.

³A. J. M. Smith, "A Unified Personality: Birney's Poems", Canadian Literature, 30 (1966), 8-9.

⁴Milton Wilson, "Poet Without a Muse", Canadian Literature, 30 (1966), 20.

⁵Earle Birney, Selected Poems 1940-1966 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1966). Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from this edition and are cited by page number in the text.

Chapter II

¹Robillard, Birney, p. 8.

²For a full discussion of "David" see Birney, The Cow Jumped Over the Moon (Holt, Rinehart & Winston of Canada, Limited, 1972), pp. 4-79, and Robillard, "David", Birney, pp. 9-17. Robillard goes into much of the ironic detail in the poem.

³Birney writes: "What I treasure are...comments which say things about the poem I would have liked to. An example, for me, is a single sentence in Professor Robillard's recent study...in which he defines...a major theme of 'David': "When one's very anima--that which distinguishes one, and makes for the kind of life one lives--is wounded, physical death is preferable to spiritual death'." See The Cow Jumped Over the Moon, p. 69. The sentence Birney quotes is from Robillard's Birney, p. 15.

⁴See Robillard, Birney: "For David, the laws of man and those of nature are parallel, if not identical; and it is man's truly human purpose to realize that truth." p. 14.

⁵Earle Birney, Trial of a City and Other Verse (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1952). All subsequent references to the play are taken from this edition.

⁶Desmond Pacey in "Earle Birney", Ten Canadian Poets (Toronto: Ryerson, 1958), p. 319, writes that the geologist "testifies to one of Birney's favourite ideas that human civilization is only a moment in the long aeons of geologic time."

Chapter III

¹Frank Davey, Earle Birney (Toronto: The Copp Clark Publishing Company, 1971). See Chapter One of Davey's Book for an account of Birney's life and career to date.

²M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, Third Edition (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., rpt. 1971), pp. 81-82.

³Earle Birney, Down the Long Table (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1955), p. 19. All quotations from the novel are from this edition and are cited by page number.

Chapter IV

¹Robillard, Earle Birney, pp. 47-48.

²In Birney's discussion of "For George Lamming" in The Cow Jumped Over the Moon, he states: "You must move about in a country of black people whose ancestors were slaves, and had been made slaves perhaps by one's own ancestors, to feel what I am talking about, which is not at all a personal shame but a racial albatross" (p. 100).

³Ibid., p. 101.

Chapter V

¹Selected Poems does not include "The Toronto Board of Trade goes abroad". This poem is found in Near False Creek Mouth (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1964), 23.

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