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

by

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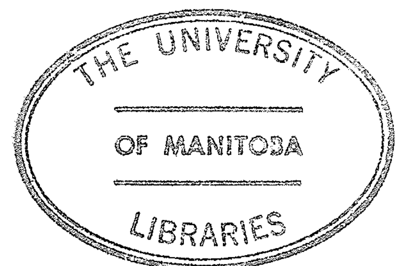

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ABSTRACT

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.

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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

> By the shoguns' palace   the Important Cultural Property
> (*SP*, 11)

where, in quiet dejection, he thinks:

> I stare at the staring
> penned carp that flail on each other's backs
> to the shrunk pool's edge for the crumb this non-fish
> tossed   Is this the Day's one parable?
> Or under that peeling pagoda the five hundred tons
> of hermaphrodite Word?   (*SP*, 11)

Birney's mask at this point questions his own self, his own ability to partake of some form of activity that will bring with it some inner feeling of well-being.

In great dissatisfaction, after seeing images of the city and not understanding what it is he is actually seeing, the persona returns to the hotel where he once again meets the maid. Suddenly the maid's face changes, "the closed/ lotus opens to a smile" (*SP*, 11), and she points to a kite in the sky. The kite is in the form of a carp, the same carp the persona was unable to give meaning to during the day.

At this point, the poem reverses its direction, moving away from the alienation and coldness depicted in the preceding stanzas. Birney makes use of the common symbol of a boy's kite to bring about the persona's insight into the reason for his dissatisfaction and frustration with Kyoto. The maid's smile provides for the persona the warmth of human contact that gives to the trip the significance he has to this point failed to discover. Former images suddenly

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 inividualized 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,