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RADICAL PERCEPTIONS:
THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICS
ON EARLE BIRNEY'S EARLY POETRY

by

Harvey E. MacLean B.A.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English

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Ottawa, Ontario
August 10
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on Earle Birney's Early Poetry

submitted by Harvey E. MacLean B.A.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
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.....
Thesis Supervisor

.....
Chairman, Department of English

Carleton University

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Abstract

This thesis identifies and documents the presence of a political influence on Earle Birney's early poetry that is directly related to his commitment to Trotskyism in the 1930s. The thesis argues that Birney's socialist affiliation is both a political and an aesthetic alignment that significantly shapes his initial poetic production.

Chapter One reviews Birney criticism from the earliest to the most recent evaluations and discusses the pervasive critical inattention to the political dimension of Birney's poems. Chapter Two examines the type of Marxist aesthetic influencing Birney's early poetry and relates the formulation of this aesthetic to Birney's political experience. Chapter Three conducts a reappraisal of Birney's four initial volumes of poetry, confirms the continuing presence of a socialist imprint on these poems, and demonstrates how Birney's socialist vision informs their form and content.

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Abbreviations

<u>DOP</u>	<u>David and other Poems</u> (Ryerson, 1942).
<u>NiT</u>	<u>Now is Time</u> (Ryerson, 1945).
<u>SA</u>	<u>The Strait of Anian</u> (Ryerson, 1948).
<u>TOAC</u>	<u>Trial of a City and Other Verse</u> (Ryerson, 1952).

Introduction

For the past five decades, Earle Birney has been one of the most important and honoured writers in Canada. The briefest of summaries reveals the following activities and achievements: a writer of poetry, novels, short stories and radio plays; an editor of the Canadian Forum and the Canadian Poetry Magazine; a university professor and medieval scholar; the founder of the first creative writing programme in a Canadian university and the recipient of several awards for literary excellence, among them, two Governor General's Awards for poetry and the Lorne Pierce Gold Medal for literature. Although these accomplishments have assured Birney an important place in the history of modern Canadian poetry, there is one aspect of Birney's career which has received very little critical attention: the influence exerted on Birney's creative writing by his seven-year commitment to Trotskyism in the thirties. The question of Birney's place and significance in the Canadian literary tradition cannot be fully answered until this issue is adequately addressed.

In 1955, at the height of the Cold War, Birney published Down the Long Table, a novel that makes fiction of his attraction to and subsequent affiliation with Marxism in the 1930s. The protagonist, Gordon Saunders, whose academic career and political experiences frequently recall Birney's

own, finds himself impelled towards a utopian socialist vision. In Vancouver, after being asked by his Trotskyist faction in Toronto to build a cadre there, Saunders is searching through his thoughts for the true, underlying motive behind his political commitment:

There must, of course, have been something else, something more tenuous and yet more powerful, which had kept the fire in him long after his reason told him that his flame was unregarded and dying. Had it been simply the conviction, the logical and absurd and true and impossible faith . . . that socialism, some kind of socialism, was the complete solution for all of man's man-made ills . . . that the race was indeed capable, once headed from the destroying cliffs, of settling into upland valleys of contentment and reason and beauty beyond anything yet imagined. (Birney's emphasis; 184-5)

Like Joe Harris, in Birney's poem of the same name, the socialism that Saunders is willing to work towards must be both realistic and idealistic; he will only follow "a creed" (a moral vision), not "a dogma" (a prescriptive ideological code) (NiT 26).

The novel clearly suggests that Birney developed both a political and an aesthetic orientation during his most overtly politically active days. Stalinism, which advocated a dogmatic and prescriptive aesthetic, in rigid conformity to the brutal and bureaucratic Soviet system of government, held no attraction for Birney as he increasingly followed Trotsky's ideas on literature and politics. For Trotsky, the creation of a classless, genuinely socialist society could never coexist with a bureaucratic shackling of art

because the proletariat must absorb and transcend, not merely reject, the cultural values of the past on the road to this truly human society. Down the Long Table's depiction of the political and aesthetic conflicts between Stalinism and Trotskyism is important in that Saunders' experience and attitudes confirm the kind of socialist vision informing Birney's writing when he first seriously begins to publish poetry at the beginning of the war.

As the title of this thesis suggests, the emphasis in this study is on Birney's poetry rather than on his fiction, and on the first decade of his poetry rather than on his entire career as a poet. This approach was adopted partly because it is as a poet that Birney has achieved his most notable successes and is best known, and partly because of time and space constraints. By concentrating solely on the poetry that Birney wrote immediately after his years of intense political engagement, it is hoped that a clear, coherent argument can be made for the presence of a socialist imprint on, at the very least, the first four volumes of poems, which deal primarily with the Depression and the War, and with their immediate social aftermath. The later, revised versions of these poems, and their possibility of a residual socialist imprint will not be considered in this study. Despite my restricted focus, it could also be argued (and ought at least to be explored) that after 1952 Birney's writing continues to be

recognizably shaped by his intense engagement with Marxist politics and aesthetics in the thirties. Distance from that earlier experience, changing personal and historical conditions, and Birney's continued exploration of poetic forms and techniques suggest that however the presence of a socialist imprint reveals itself in the verse written after 1952, it will undoubtedly differ from the way it is present in the verse written up to that date. 1952 is a convenient and appropriate cut-off point because Birney turns for a time to fiction in the early fifties, and the Cold War changed the relationship of most politically engaged writers to their past, to their readers, and to the kind of poetic discourse that was allowable or likely to be effective.

Chapter One, "Critical Silence: The Politics of Birney's Early Poetry," attempts a comprehensive, evaluative review of critical responses to the political dimension of Birney's initial verse that ranges from the earliest reviews of his contemporaries to the more considered evaluations of recent critics. This evaluative review will necessarily inquire into the critical assumptions that contribute to the "critical silence" surrounding the political aspects of Birney's early poetry. Therefore, it plays a crucial role in the overall argument, for it begins to demonstrate the need for a serious reappraisal of Birney's poetry that does not evade, suppress or subsume the socialist vision that animates his writing. Chapter Two, "Trotsky or Stalin: The

Politics of Birney's Aesthetics," initiates an assessment of the Marxist aesthetic shaping the form and content of Birney's poetry. Birney's academic and critical writings are considered here as straightforward expositions of Trotsky's basic aesthetic contentions in Literature and Revolution. The final chapter of the thesis, "Socialism and Poetry: Culture and Society on Trial in Birney's Poetry," will examine the legacy of the thirties, the politicized aesthetic that informs the radical social critique of Birney's early poetry. As a whole, this chapter is structured to advance the thesis that Birney's poems bear the imprint of his commitment to socialism in the way that they judge the structures and processes of a civilization that produced a century of war, poverty, racism, genocide, capitalist oppression and cultural impoverishment.

Chapter One

Critical Silence: The Politics of Birney's Early Poetry

Earle Birney's initial poetic production, published in four volumes, David and Other Poems, 1942; Now is Time, 1945; The Strait of Anian: Selected Poems, 1948; and Trial of a City and Other Verse, 1952, has attracted its share of critical commentary. Notwithstanding this attention, one must agree with Bruce Nesbitt's contention that "balanced judgements of Birney's work . . . are relatively scarce despite the volume of criticism and reviews" (1). In part, this imbalance reveals itself in the relative neglect of the political dimension in Birney's writing, and it is with critical responses to the political aspect of his early poetry that this evaluative review of Birney criticism will primarily concern itself. Emphasis will be placed upon the critical methodology (formal and/or thematic approaches) and terminology (critical language supporting these procedures) that these critics employ in their responses to the social-political issues represented in Birney's initial verse. The survey will aim at a balanced and representative selection of criticism, from the earliest reviews by Birney's contemporaries to more recent evaluations.

Northrop Frye's review of David and Other Poems, in the Canadian Forum, concentrates primarily on "David" for its "real story" and "straightforward narrative." These

features are contrasted with "the conventions of modern poetry," that, in Frye's estimation, were overly dependent upon "fake symbolism" and "philosophic rumination." Frye chooses to comment briefly on the volume's other poems. He praises Birney for "some brilliant flashes of imagery" in "briefer lyrics," such as "Monody on a Century" and "European Nocturne," and prefers to remain silent on the political concerns expressed through such imagery. "Dusk on English Bay," Frye suggests, is "a vision of a spinning world at peace and at war." Given that Frye views the poem's simple "time-marches-on conclusion" as "rather frivolous," it is no wonder that none of its radical critique on the horror of war is registered in his reading. Frye finds "Vancouver Lights" to be "far more impressive" because it ends "in a tone of quiet resistance" (278). This evaluative comparison is restricted to the poems' aesthetic impressions; no reference is made to the historical and political content of either poem.

E.K. Brown's comments on the David collection echo Frye's preference for the substance and realism of the narrative in "David" and refer in a similar brief and essentially depoliticizing manner to the social context of the volume's other verse. Brown also repeats Frye's particular inattention to poems bearing an important socialist imprint. He commends the "little collection" for its "authentic originality," singling out "On Going to the

Wars" as a "topical poem" imbued with "rough idealism," and "Dusk on English Bay" as "one of the most moving war poems to come out of Canada" (76-78). The presence of a socialist influence on Birney's aesthetic is never considered as a source of the volume's originality, or as a key element in the former poem's topicality and the latter's powerful expression of war's negating futility.

John Sutherland and E.J. Pratt continue this pattern of privileging formal and thematic treatments of the volume's major poem at the expense of its companion poems, whose political content would clearly benefit from the kind of detailed analysis given "David." Sutherland reductively thematizes Birney's "consistent use of a Canadian landscape" and allows this theme to obscure the political ideas informing "Vancouver Lights" ("the night-time city and the ocean beyond it are spread before us like a great carpet on which a drama of human thought and emotion is acted out") and "Hands" ("almost in spite of its heady images, gains a real beauty because it draws in factual details of a familiar landscape") (44). Sutherland gives no considered evaluation to the political dimension of the "human thought and emotion" in the former poem and ignores the historical-political basis of the "factual details" in the latter poem. Pratt's over-emphasis of the title poem's "strength and stride of good narrative" prohibits any exploration of the political concerns in the shorter poems that, we are told,

"give variety to the collection" and "suffer by too much condensation" (34-5).

This reluctance to ascribe full significance to the political dimension of Birney's poems continues with the critical approaches to his second volume, Now is Time. Because its content and arrangement are so ideologically aggressive, however, at a time when many would rather enjoy a period of post-war peace, reviewers had little choice but to respond in some way to the presence of a Marxist influence that they had chosen to disregard or deny in Birney's first collection of verse. Accordingly, E.K. Brown concedes that a "social idealism . . . animates" Birney and he yokes this idealism to Birney's tendency to write elegies. "Joe Harris 1913-42," one of the "elegies" replacing Birney's propensity for narrative, presents "a generalized accusing picture of the plight of a generation of poor Canadian boys upon whom a cruel necessity forced first a depression and then a war." This "cruel necessity" remains an abstract force that Brown politely chooses to ignore. Similarly, the socialist critique that informs "For Steve" is generalized and abstracted as "a story . . . told with even less concentration on the individual, and a more wide-ranging concern with the Canadian economic and social problem," just as "the poor of the tractor-man's generation," in "Man on a Tractor," represent those who "had in the thirties an exceedingly raw deal" (272). Birney's

sympathy for the poor is condoned, without, it should be noted, any account of how this sympathy is politically structured. Attacks against the rich, on the other hand, are rejected on artistic grounds: "The dramatic quality in Mr. Birney's poetry suffers by contrast between his ever-ready sympathy with the poor, a sympathy grounded in understanding, and his summary unconvincing presentation of their masters" (273).

Watson Kirkconnell, albeit from a cynical perspective, is unusual for directly confronting the leftist orientation in Birney's writing. The radical elements of Birney's poetry create a "mood . . . of intense bitterness," according to Kirkconnell, and could only appeal to a "clique of Leftist poseurs." Perhaps because of his distaste, Kirkconnell declines to pursue the implications of the socialist influence he at least identifies, and prefers to redirect his review to the volume's "intellectual power . . . as evident as ever," but hampered by its "style," which "has gone to seed in contortions of metaphysical modernity" (36). M.H. Martin contrasts the David volume's emphasis upon "implacable nature" with Now is Time's concern with "man's implacability, the war and its tragedies, and a sense of responsibility" (292). While this critical distinction is alleged, the source of the shift in attention from nature to man in Birney's poetry is masked. The distinction remains an hypothesis and its precise social and economic

alignments are left undocumented. Accordingly, Martin chooses to credit "Man on a Tractor" with a "profounder sense of social values, more specifically expressed than in any of the earlier work" (292) without any account of the political and aesthetic basis for this achievement.

As these early reviews of Birney's first two volumes of poetry indicate, there was very little critical engagement with the social-political aspects of these poems. This initial reception, expressed largely within the methodology and terminology of a humanistic formalism, fails to grapple rigorously and precisely with the possibility of a socialist imprint on Birney's poetry, even though most of these critics, as contemporaries of Birney in the very small world of Canadian letters, must have been aware of his intense allegiance to Marxism during the thirties. The use of a critical orientation and language that render the issue of political influence irrelevant continues unabated in the reception of Birney's next two volumes.

Roy Daniells finds that the "critical thrust" of The Strait of Anian: Selected Poems "is made with poise and dexterity; large ideas are moved without strain; tangled issues are presented without confusion." Although Daniells takes some note of the "ideas" and "issues" in the poetry, they are observed and expressed through abstractions and generalizations. In reviewing a volume that contains poems like "For Steve" and "The Road to Nijmegen" that confront

the particularly horrible and graphic realities of war, and "Ulysses," that draws on Greek myth to satirize angrily any facile distinction between periods of peace and periods of war, Daniells rejects the more unpleasant aspects of the poetry's leftist assertions by gathering them thematically under the vague umbrella of the "[c]ultural and political criticism of Canada." Such overgeneralized categorization displaces any detailed or concrete clarification of the values and assumptions that animate the "large ideas" and "tangled issues" to which Daniells alludes; furthermore, it works to discourage any politically focussed consideration of the oppositional quality of the thoughts that Birney puts in "the mind of a post-war Canadian" in "Man on a Tractor" (48).

A.G. Bailey, in his critical treatment of The Strait of Anian, appears to move beyond a formalist approach that evades or ignores the political content of Birney's writing. Bailey argues that one cannot appreciate Birney's "choice of words and the way he forms his images as though these activities were unconnected with his attitudes towards man and nature." From this premise, Bailey attempts to develop an appreciation of how Birney's poems have "meaning in the larger human context" and how "the poet gives literary form to the responses that men have made to the great contemporary sickness in the human family, of which the second World War was a terrible symptom." These

formulations, however, informed as they seem to be by the tacit admission of an ideological influence on the verse, become little more than liberal humanist accommodations as opposed to a politically focussed critical analysis. They dwindle into an appropriately generalized, idealist abstraction that disguises the poetry's socialist aesthetic and social criticism: "man's soul is a nursery of qualities of transcendent worth. . . . To the extent that man transcends the conditions of his brutish origin, he deserves the title of humanity." The political complexities of the poems are even further obscured when Bailey privileges private experience over historical/political fact: "The rise of fascism that issued in 'twelve red years of rage' . . . shows how blurred and uncertain are the boundaries between the kingdom of man and that of the brute, and how hard man must yet strive to conquer the enemy in himself" (205-6).

In his assessment of Trial of a City and Other Verse, Northrop Frye tries to filter the socialist content of Birney's verse through the formal perspective of "myth" criticism. Frye begins with the contention that the setting of the volume's verse-drama ("Trial of a City") "has for its larger background the ancient theme of wrath and mercy, of man's perpetual failure to justify his existence in the sight of the gods by his merits, a failure now brought to a crisis by his new techniques of self-destruction" (273). He

emphasizes "the unity and seriousness of the theme because the brilliance of the writing may mislead one into regarding it only as a verbal stunt" (274). Frye's thematization, dependent on literary history and mythical yearning, is an evasive manoeuvre. It diverts attention from the critique of environmental atrocity that animated the creation of "Trial of a City" in the first place (the proposed damming of Buttle Lake in Vancouver), and allows Frye to attach disproportionate significance to Mrs. Anyone's appearance at the poem's conclusion, significance that is replete with the idealist yearnings of humanist discourse: "She stands for the real life of really free people, where the present is, at every moment, a new creation of meaning, and of love. In such a conception of the present there is no causality, no inevitable future, no dead reckonings" (270). The remaining verse of the collection is relegated to the review's concluding paragraph and reduced to Birney's attitude towards and concern for nature ("the immense trees and sinister mountains of British Columbia landscape"). Frye considers "gingerbread conceits" such as "pacifist firs" and "revolver Sun" as "unfunctional," without discussing the political-aesthetic motivation that is implied by the use of such aggressive, military figures (270).

Simon Paynter responds to the negativity of "Trial of a City" in his evaluation of the verse-drama: "for 41 of the 47 pages the positive element has been absent and the damage

has been done" (91). Whether the impairment is formal or thematic is never made clear. Rather than contending with the socialist critique perhaps fuelling the negativity he perceives, Paynter's single-minded emphasis on the negative expression throughout Birney's poem serves to diminish the poem's ideological and discursive complexity. Paynter's disregard of qualifying evidence for his claim conditions his treatment of other features of the poem. The poem's satire is judged ineffective because it "is represented only by the old British-Columbian standby of landscape and nature," just as the play's overall effectiveness suffers "still more from the author's weakness for verbal exuberance" (91). Somehow, Paynter's characterization of the satire's effectiveness manages to exclude the social-political alternatives debated between the Salish Chief and Legion, a debate that consistently upholds the former's communal, egalitarian way of life.

An evaluative review of contemporary responses to the political influence on Birney's first four volumes of poetry reveals, then, a fundamental bias in critical methodology and terminology. These approaches, supported by humanist, idealist discourse and the scantiest evidence, and expressed through recuperative language, work to devalue the imprint of Birney's socialist affiliation on his poetry. When one moves from contemporary reviews to more considered evaluations from the sixties on, the critical bias persists.

Desmond Pacey and A.J.M. Smith provide fair examples of a continuing prejudice in Birney criticism. As well, their more detailed analyses (Pacey criticizes Birney's poetry in a 33-page chapter from his book, Ten Canadian Poets, and Smith considers his verse in a 10-page critical article) prepare us for a review of the book-length treatments in the 1970s. Pacey describes Birney as "the interpreter and chronicler of the Canadian people during the middle decades of the twentieth century" (295). Extending this category to include a perspective that seems initially promising as an appropriate commentary on Birney's social vision, Pacey conveys his impression of Birney the "public rather than . . . private poet . . . concerned with the fate of society rather than with the state of his own soul" (294). Pacey then describes Birney's arrival in Toronto in 1932 and his subsequent political activism as the basis for a "theoretical justification for his failure to write during these years." Birney's seven-year political commitment is described ambivalently by Pacey. He refers, for instance, to Birney "paraphrasing Trotskyist doctrine," rather than crediting him with adhering to Trotskyism's basic political and aesthetic premises (301). Pacey sidesteps the issue of political influence rather ingeniously by simply pushing it to one side, by not connecting his Trotskyist affiliation to the previously mentioned concern "with the fate of society" in Birney's poetry.

This avoidance tactic enters into specific readings of the poems. For instance, "Hands," which "alternates natural description with social observation," is reduced to a Romantic opposition between nature and society: "it is a fine projection of a generally human, but specifically Canadian, dilemma: whether to stay in the shelter of these woods, or to issue forth into the social struggle that repels and yet compels us" (307). Pacey's humanist exposition of the thematic opposition he finds in "Hands" is at best inferential--and at worst circular, since it assures its idealist conclusion. He is reluctant to address the issue of a functional, purposive nature contrasted with dysfunctional, war-mongering social forces that is developed in "Hands." To do so would be to risk unduly complicating the terms of the vague opposition he postulates and would necessitate some acknowledgement of the history and politics that are clearly evident in the poem. It is little wonder, then, that he writes of "Dusk on English Bay" that it emphasizes the "fragility of man . . . throughout: we are mere pathetic pawns in the hands of a universal destructive power" (308). This reading mystifies the poem's assumptions that social formations like capitalism and imperialism, which contribute ultimately to war, are the products of active human agents. Similarly, Pacey writes that "Vancouver Lights" is "optimistic and humanistic in temper" and displays "Birney's greatest strength as a poet," the

"capacity movingly and convincingly to express a persistent faith in man's power to make or unmake his own destiny" (308-9). Although human agency is admitted here, this formulation neglects the idea of collective responsibility at the very root of Birney's expression of "persistent faith" in this poem. Although he records Birney's earlier political affiliation, Pacey nonetheless proceeds to display a methodology and terminology which imbue the poetry with generalized affirmations and humanizing projections that evade or suppress its underlying social-political assumptions.

A.J.M. Smith, in his article aimed at demonstrating the "unified personality" within Birney's poetry, adopts a similar strategy. After stating, almost as an afterthought, that Birney "is also politically and socially of the left," Smith implicitly aligns Birney's leftist orientation with his poetic tendency to be "experimental, though in his case, paradoxically enough, his most successful experiment is the experiment of being traditional" (5). Smith's discussion of "Anglosaxon Street," "Mappemounde," and "Trial of a City," as one would expect because of his oblique admission of Birney's socialist affiliation, concentrates solely on the literary influence of "Beowulf, Chaucer, Piers Plowman, and Hopkins" (5). "Hands," "Vancouver Lights," and "Dusk on the Bay" represent the "setting free" of Birney's "unique poetic personality," in Smith's judgement, and are "sincere and

accurate expressions of what a Canadian felt in the dark days of 1939 and 1940" (9). The sincerity and accuracy of expression in Birney's war poems remain depoliticized terms of reference for Smith because he never sees them in the context of what Birney as a Canadian socialist felt and thought when World War II began.

Frank Davey, Richard Robillard and Peter Aichinger write three "series" books on Birney in the seventies. In his initial, biographical chapter, Davey includes various aspects of Birney's political experience. Davey makes explicit references to the impact of politics on Birney's academic career (Birney's PhD dissertation "remained unfocused until his Marxist conversion; then a thesis emerged," 13) and literary criticism ("Birney's articles and reviews throughout 1937 and 1938 are uncompromisingly Trotskyist," 17). The importance that Marxist politics played in Birney's poetry, however, is presented in terms that diminish any substantial continuing role: "the humanitarianism which led Birney to Marxism and the optimistic humanism of Marxism itself endure throughout his poetry in the underlying assumption that poetry should speak to men and assist them to master their circumstances" (18).

This sanitized depiction of the revolutionary feature of Birney's socialist allegiance and its suggested humanizing influence on his verse form the basis for Davey's cursory, thematic approach to the poetry of his first four

volumes. The images and the metaphors of the David collection are criticized for being "predominantly violent" and "frequently military" (45); there is no discussion of the possible reflections in these images of their creator's socialist aesthetic or impending participation in an imperialist war. Now is Time contains new poems, "largely ones of social statement" that are motivated by Birney's "professorial and authoritarian pose" (47) and the literary influence of George Barker, Henry Treece and Margaret Crossland, poets Birney met in England during the war (48). Davey supports his "ad hominem" proclivities with comments like this, while apparently analysing the new poems in Birney's emerging volumes: "most striking in the new poems is Birney's complete commitment to the role of poet as authority. From his country's chronicler in Now is Time he has now become his country's interpreter" (50).

Davey is reluctant to explain how Birney's Trotskyist egalitarianism had been defeated or displaced by the academic discourse of authority. He prefers to identify scattered instances of this alleged tendency in Birney's early verse or deliver sweeping generalizations about Birney's "pose of omniscience"(49), his propensity for overview and his rigidly formal, rhetorical stance. In "Trial of a City," for example, Birney's celebration of "myth" and "story" is evident. Davey claims that this is a "triumph" over "his Marxist skepticism" that moves Birney

beyond the "chronicling" quality of his first three volumes of verse to the "full-scale exploration of the mythology of Vancouver's past" (87). Davey can clear no critical space within which to engage either Birney's sense of actual events from Vancouver's history or the political vision shaping and constructing the poem's radical critique.

Whereas Davey fails to distinguish between the poet and the text and produces a critical practise which undervalues the social and ideological context within which Birney's poems were written, Richard Robillard, equipped with his formalist methodology, distances himself from Birney the poet's intentions and the extratextual reality of politics and history. In his introduction, Robillard mentions that some of Birney's reviews and essays in the Canadian Forum, between 1936 and 1940, "clearly indicate Birney's socialism in those years." But a few lines later he blandly asserts that "with few exceptions, Birney's poems are not specifically about politics" (6). Evidently, the influence of politics on Birney's critical orientation cannot be allowed to contaminate the imaginary realm of his creative writing.

One is not surprised, then, when Robillard announces his formalist intentions: "To study the forms of his poetry is to learn how meanings are realized" (8). As Robillard moves through the poems, his commitment to textual autonomy, replete with detailed, close readings and prosodic analysis,

shields him from having to admit the presence of a socialist aesthetic. "Dusk on the Bay" and "Vancouver Lights" exemplify "Birney's control of his attitudes to war" (22). The "syntactical parallelisms" of "Time-Bomb" seem to "offer a form in which the terrible can be seen and understood without the distortion of strong emotions" (30-31) while the "sardonic questionings" of "World War III" can only be answered by the poem's "full, ironic rhymes and by its juxtapositions of the ludicrous and the significant" (34). For Robillard, Birney's texts become idealized, apolitical articulations, with little or no social and political significance.

Peter Aichinger defers any detailed considerations of the influence of politics on Birney's verse until his book's conclusion, "People and Politics" (42-63). Aichinger grants that "Joe Harris" and "For Steve" are "preoccupied with revising the social order" (153), and what the former poem's protagonist desires is "a socialist society based upon love, reason, and generosity" (154). The poems, "Hands," "Monody for a Century," and "Dusk on English Bay" are "to a greater or lesser degree . . . forecasts of the impending slaughter." All these poems fluctuate simplistically between optimism and pessimism because Aichinger perceives them as "Birney's occasional expressions of hope for a better social order after the war . . . counterbalanced by the unhappy realization that there may be no world left

after this particular war; in such a situation there is very little point in arguing over differing political theories or planning for a better world" (154).

Aichinger minimizes and distorts the urgent impulse behind Birney's poetry. That there is much at stake in considering the political and economic implications of reconstructing society is most evident in Birney's immediate post-war volume Now is Time and the imaginary indictment of Vancouver he conducts in "Trial of a City" during the Cold War. Aichinger's critical procedure is to essentialize and dichotomize the poetry's politics as manifestations of Birney's optimism and pessimism, hope and despair. The most that can be extrapolated from such a critical position is that Birney's warnings are presented on a "universal scale," telling "the world at large what is sure to happen unless profiteering . . . and the unequal distribution of wealth are brought under control" (155). Particular treatments of poems are carried out ahistorically and asocially and provide interpretations little more than wandering generalities: "War Winter" represents "Birney's essential pessimism about the future of society" and the "winter" to which it refers "is in the heart of man as much as it is part of the natural world"; "Man is a Snow" and "... Or a Wind" seem "to be substantial evidence that as late as 1947 Birney still held out some hope for a new political and social order" (154-55); and the "deadly impasse" in "Trial

of a City" between Legion and Powers because of their "reason" and "logic" can only be "resolved by a suprarational, i.e., an existentialist, position based solely upon the sanctity of life and the power of love" (157).

Despite the explicit documentation of Birney's political activism in Davey's biographical chapter, in Aichinger's political section, and Birney's autobiographical memoir (Spreading Time), few recent critics have considered his socialist affiliation of the thirties, an important, shaping influence on his initial volumes of poetry. Examples of this critical bias can be found in a 1981 issue of Essays on Canadian Writing devoted entirely to Birney criticism. Sandra Djwa contributes an article ("A Developing Tradition") solely concerned with recovering Birney for the tradition of Canadian Modernism. Djwa places Birney in the Pratt tradition because of both poets' concern with "metaphors of nature equipped with tooth and claw" (33). The Pratt influence provides some explanatory force when reading "David" but weakens considerably when applied to the companion poems and those of Birney's subsequent three volumes, particularly those that bear an unmistakable socialist imprint. Perhaps this is why Djwa applies her unqualified assertions no further than "David" (45) and moves further away from specific applications to rely on a litany of generalized literary influences (38). As for

Djwa's suggested influence of Irving Babbitt's humanism (41), a more accurate sense of the pessimism and responsibility that Birney felt in 1939 can be attributed to the perilous political climate of the late thirties and, more importantly, to Birney's gradual disillusionment with active socialism because of the role played by the Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War, the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact, and the totalitarian control of Stalin's Russia.

Les Mcleod ("Irony and Affirmation in the Poetry of Earle Birney") studies "the problem of affirmation within the ironic mode" as a primary concern in Birney's poetry (130). Birney's 1936 doctoral dissertation, "Chaucer's Irony," becomes the primary focus of Mcleod's deliberations on Birney's ironic poetic techniques. After presumably reading the dissertation, Mcleod summarizes Birney's critical position: "Birney argued that Chaucer's irony reflected his 'ambiguous class position'. . . Birney posited the necessity or priority of irony at the transition stage of a class struggle. . . . 'Chaucer's Irony' may be read as Birney's own rationale for irony, for the kind of sophisticated and subtle poetry which he began to publish immediately after presenting his dissertation" (130-31). Given that irony and affirmation are the thematic constraints that Mcleod places upon his approach to Birney's poetry, it is not surprising that he omits mention of his

Marxist critique of Chaucer's irony in the dissertation. Despite his clear acknowledgement of Birney's politics ("Birney the twentieth-century Marxist organizer" and "Birney's active involvement in radical politics" 131), they are not examined as an influence on the critical stance in Birney's analysis of Chaucer's irony.

McLeod's tactical separation of Birney's political affiliation from his aesthetic orientation results in depoliticized treatments of the poems. "Hands," which is read for its affirmation, "expresses the pain, but also the necessity, of action in the lapsarian world where man is primarily separate from nature. The poem's penultimate line . . . is a chanted lament . . . because man is not part of the unthinking, silent process of nature, he has the power to visualize and, therefore, change his world" (135). This "hidden affirmation" bears no relationship to the collective action and social change that the socialist imprint on Birney's poem called for. "Vancouver Lights" discloses a more "overt" affirmation: "Birney uses techniques of irony to reject the tragic and express an heroic vision of the potential of man." Furthermore, we are told that the poem's apparent conflict between man and the gods contains a "real conflict within man himself," a conflict only discovered "when man realizes he has invented his gods and is himself the ultimate power for good or evil" (135).

David Stouck, in his book Major Canadian Authors, would

also rather deal with the political features of Birney's poems in moral, abstract terms. Ahistorical and asocial "humanity" is pulled out of poems clearly conditioned by historical and political pressures. "Vancouver Lights" extends Birney's "double vision of nature to include humankind; in a dark universe, humanity with its intelligence is both the source of light and its extinguisher" (100). Humanity is set against generalized, "dark" forces, whose social processes are masked by essentialist appeals to fundamental and ultimate issues. In "Trial of a City," Stouck views Birney approaching "the question fundamental to his humanism: can the human species create for itself a meaningful future, or will it ultimately destroy itself through its instincts for cruelty and greed?" (102). Here, Stouck poses a significant question, but never follows it up with a reference to capitalist production, to its economic laws and forms of political organization which account for the "cruelty" and "greed" of Vancouver's social structure far more effectively than "instincts."

This evaluative review of Birney criticism has confirmed that few critical inquiries into Birney's early poetry attribute an important, shaping influence to his socialist affiliation of the 1930s. A persistent methodological and terminological bias exists, from the earliest to the most recent assessments, to suppress or evade the impact of Birney's politics on these poems. To

begin a preliminary attempt at recovering the political dimension of Birney's initial verse, the next chapter will consider the extent to which his seven-year commitment to Trotskyism was both a political and an aesthetic alignment. Because this examination will serve primarily to document the impact of Trotskyism on Birney's aesthetic, it will also play an important role in the later reappraisal of the socialist imprint on Birney's early poetry.

Chapter Two

Trotsky or Stalin:

The Politics of Birney's Aesthetics

This chapter will examine the impact of Birney's involvement with Trotskyism on the theories of literature and politics that he worked out in his critical writing during the thirties. In order to pursue the hypothesis that Birney's early poetry is significantly shaped by a socialist world view, one must first establish how committed he had become to a Marxist aesthetic by the end of the decade.

In the autumn of 1927, after completing his Masters thesis at the University of Toronto, Birney went to the Berkeley campus of the University of California on a teaching fellowship. The University of Toronto's English department was not yet equipped, financially or academically, to assist graduate students beyond the Masters level. By 1929, despite the onset of the Depression, Birney was fortunate enough to be employed as an instructor in English Literature at the University of Utah. In the spring of 1932, however, budgetary constraints were threatening this position and the only academic employment available for Birney in Canada was another summer instructorship at the University of British Columbia and a doctoral fellowship at the University of Toronto. Birney accepted both the instructorship and the fellowship.

It was while he was studying in Toronto that Birney began to express more interest in politics:

I was now belatedly turning into a political animal. Utah had given me a year's leave of absence, but along with it the warning I'd be dropped for certain, a year after I returned there, unless the Depression lifted. That paralysis, however, was getting worse -- there, here, everywhere. I could expect by June '34, to join other young professors in a Bennett Relief Camp. I began reading Cole, John Strachey [for their interpretations of Marxism], and the political articles in the Canadian Forum. (Spreading Time 25)

In January of 1933, this exposure to Marxist ideology intensified into "a crash program of 'leftwing' reading, starting with the Communist Manifesto and moving further into Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Plekhanov, Lenin, Stalin, with side glances into the literature of the new (Canadian) League for Social Reconstruction" (26,27).

Birney spent his "last winter" teaching at the University of Utah in 1934. It was during this period that the general influence of Marxism developed into political activism for Birney when he established a Marxist student club on the campus and led "an investigating committee of faculty and students into a martial law area where striking coal miners were suffering mass arrest and beatings" (28). In June of 1934, Birney left Utah for Toronto. By this time, Birney was "well-enough known in American Trotskyist circles to be invited to New York to work on the party's theoretical organ, the New International" (28). News of a Royal Society Fellowship to complete his doctoral thesis at

the University of London reached Birney on the day of his departure for New York, however, and he decided to continue his PhD research in London.

Despite changing direction geographically, Birney did remain on the same course politically and aesthetically. His doctoral dissertation developed into a Marxist analysis of Chaucer's irony and he organized his political activities before leaving Toronto for the University of London in the fall of 1934. Frank Davey observes: "That fall . . . Birney had managed to contact the Trotskyist hierarchy in Europe before leaving, and had received instructions to join the party faction within the British Independent Labour Party. He was also instructed to reconcile this faction with two other self-proclaimed groups of Trotskyists in England. Throughout 1935, he spent his nights and weekends organizing unemployed groups for the I.L.P." (11). Almost fifty years later, in an interview, Birney recalled how the political activism that characterized his final year in Utah would continue in England: "Over there, I worked in the British Museum as a scholar in the daytime. And at night, I worked in politics. I joined a trade union and the Independent Labour Party [to enter its Trotskyist faction], and worked as a journalist for them, and partly as an organizer for the unemployed" ("Politics and Poetry," 125).

Approximately a year later, in 1935, Birney corresponded actively with Leon Trotsky and travelled twice

to Norway to interview him in exile. In a Canadian Forum article, entitled "Trotsky at Harvard," Marlene Kadar and Greg Teal document the intense research occurring at Harvard University since Trotsky's post-exile (post-1929) correspondence was made available there in 1980. Kadar and Teal discuss Birney in the article, under his political pseudonym, Earle Robertson, when they consider "the overtly political correspondence between Trotsky and Canadian comrades" (14). They refer specifically to two Birney documents: one is called the "Hichin Report on the Ukrainian Situation" which "analyzes the splits among Ukrainian communists . . . and their increasing disaffection with Stalinism", and the other is entitled, "Canadian Capitalism and the Strategy of the Revolutionary Movement," wherein Birney-Robertson "presents a detailed class analysis of most of the regions and economic sectors of Canada and a cogent discussion of the CCF and its policies" (14). Kadar and Teal, after reading Birney's review articles in the Canadian Forum (considered by Birney as "the only non-Stalinist Left-wing cultural magazine in Canada" 15), draw attention to "the extent to which Birney, for one, was influenced by both Trotsky's political thought and his respect for organic change in literary history" (15). The specific article cited by Kadar and Teal, "Proletarian Literature: Theory and Practise," along with others, will inform my argument when I outline how Birney's critical writing for the Forum reflects

his perception of and alignment with Trotsky's basic aesthetic premises.

In 1936, Birney left England and returned to Toronto, where he successfully defended his doctoral dissertation and began lecturing at University College. Not long after his arrival, Birney was offered the literary editorship of the Canadian Forum, a magazine he perceived as "a truly literate social-democratic monthly" (Spreading Time 28). He accepted on the grounds that it would allow him "opportunities to apply Marxist aesthetics to contemporary literature" ("Canlittering with the Forum: 1936-42," 6). This editorial position, which he held from 1936 to 1939, gave Birney the "freedom to apply [his] own concepts of 'historical materialism' to the literature [he] discussed" in the Canadian Forum. His writing and editing became an integral part of his "conscious involvement in the 'class struggle', and . . . seven-year loyalty to the cause of reforming the Third International or building a new one" (Spreading Time 27,28). The significance of this position will be clear when the crucial role it plays in the expression of Birney's Trotskyist aesthetics is demonstrated.

Birney's editorial involvement with the Forum, along with his other political commitments ("working-class meetings, rallies, demonstrations," Spreading Time 27) in Toronto, placed severe limitations on his creative writing during the thirties. In a 1951 letter to the Northern

Review, Birney explained: "I was so all-fired clear-cut political in the Thirties I regarded the writing of poetry as a treacherous withdrawal of energy from the class struggle. I allowed myself only three small verses before W.W.II--the rest of my work was written in the forties" (48). Birney's letter is also important because he is both recalling and confirming his adherence to a fundamental assumption of Trotsky's Literature and Revolution, which argues that artistic creation might be a luxury that would have to be deferred until the end of the revolution and the arrival of a truly "classless" human culture (185,86).

To begin to understand the extent to which Birney's articles in the Canadian Forum are conditioned by Trotsky's ideas on politics and literature, one must consider the two interrelated issues that Trotsky addresses in Literature and Revolution: the value of literary tradition, and "proletarian culture." With respect to literary tradition, Trotsky emphasizes the cultural-literary heritage as a valuable component in the satisfaction of the cultural needs of the masses, and he affirms the proletariat's need to absorb and assimilate the older, pre-revolutionary culture prior to transcending it:

The proletariat also needs a continuity of creative tradition. At the present time the proletariat realizes this continuity not directly, but indirectly, through the creative bourgeois intelligentsia which gravitates towards the proletariat and which wants to keep warm under its wing. The proletariat tolerates a part of this intelligentsia, supports another

part, half-adopts a third, and entirely assimilates a fourth. The policy of the Communist Party towards art is determined by the complexity of this process, by its internal manysidedness. It is impossible to reduce this policy to one formula, to something short like a bird's bill. Nor is it necessary to do this. (227)

In order to preserve the cultural value of the past, Trotsky further acknowledges that "the new artist will need all the methods and processes evolved in the past . . . in order to grasp the new life" (236).

While Trotsky was developing his argument for the role of literary tradition, he was also contending against Stalinist forces in the Soviet Union who were advocating the creation of a politically correct, "proletarian culture." Official Stalinist ideology demanded that writers conform to Communist Party dogma in their creative writing. Alan Swingewood, in his detailed analysis of the effects of Stalinist bureaucracy on post-revolutionary art in The Novel and Revolution, offers a critique of Stalinist Proletkult that is consistent with Trotsky's position:

As a theory, Proletkult was clearly based on a serious misunderstanding of Marxism, for as a social theory Marxism did not separate itself from all antecedent ideas, but both built upon and revolutionized bourgeois theory itself. . . . But perhaps more significant than the Proletkult's mechanical definition of Marxism was its implicit totalitarian assumption that only proletarian writers and artists organized by the Communist Party had the ability and the right to represent and speak for the working class and socialism. (80)

Birney gives a fictional account of the distorting

influence of Communist Party discipline in his 1955 novel, Down the Long Table. The novel's protagonist, Gordon Saunders, has been asked to explain the Communist Manifesto to "members of the Social Problems Club of the University of Toronto" (in effect a front organization for the CPC). Saunders attempts to "find out what this ninety-year old Manifesto manifests" for him (70), and the result is a political allegory that he reads to the young Communists. His allegorization of the Manifesto is denounced as indulgent. "Comrade Kay" exemplifies the manner in which explicit party discipline acts to constrain Saunders' creative expression of the Communist Manifesto:

This allegory, or nightmare, or whatever the hell it is, -- it's certainly not the summary he was asked to do -- is supposed to be an explanation of one of the great classics of Marxism. For the sake of the newer comrades present, who are getting a very false and confused notion of what Marx and Engels said, I think we ought to get right back to the text of the Manifesto, and get Mister Saunders back to it. What he read may be o.k. as poetry, and worth an A in his English Department, but it won't be a bloody bit of help in bringing about the Worker's State, comrades. (78)

Trotsky argued passionately against the totalitarian distortions of "Proletkult" because he felt everyone needed to be free from the "metaphysical concept of proletarian culture . . . and regard the question from the point of view of what the proletariat reads, what it needs, what absorbs it, what impels it to action, what elevates its cultural

level and so prepares the ground for a new art . . .
 literature vitally needed by an awakened people" (214). In
 his introduction to Literature and Revolution, Trotsky
 states his main point very clearly:

It is fundamentally incorrect to contrast
 bourgeois culture and bourgeois art with
 proletarian culture and proletarian art.
 The latter will never exist, because the
 proletarian regime is temporary and transient.
 The historic significance and moral grandeur
 of the proletarian revolution consist in the
 fact that it is laying the foundations of a
 culture which is above classes and which will
 be the first culture which is truly human. (14)

Consonant with Trotsky's ideas on the interrelated
 issues of the cultural value of the past and Proletkult is
 his conception of the interaction between literary texts and
 their social-political conditions of production. In his
 dispute with the Russian Formalists in Literature and
 Revolution, Trotsky refused to accept their concept of an
 aesthetic or artistic reality totally independent of social
 conditions. Trotsky advocated a qualified aesthetic
 autonomy and saw no contradiction between the recognition of
 art's unique methods, "its own laws of development" (176),
 on the one hand, and the equally valid recognition of the
 determination of its form and content by social-political
 reality, on the other:

It is very true that one cannot always go by the
 principles of Marxism in deciding whether to
 reject or accept a work of art. A work of art
 should, in the first place, be judged by its
 own law, that is, by the law of art. But
 Marxism alone can explain why and how a given
 tendency in art has originated in a given period

of history; in other words, who it was who made such a demand for such an artistic form and not for another, and why . . . It [art] is not a disembodied element feeding on itself, but a function of social man indissolubly tied to his life and environment. (178-9)

Trotsky's approach to literature and art was not, therefore, dogmatic or prescriptive. Baruch Knei-Paz, in The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky, clarifies:

Trotsky . . . put forward the proposition that art cannot escape the effects of its political and social environment--but that this does not make it dependent upon, or committed to, one specific social system or another. . . . This did not, in any case, lead him into the pitfalls of those who would interpret the influence of environment upon art in a crude, mechanistic fashion; he was always careful to point out that the relationship between an individual work of art --or the talent of an artist--and social factors was never direct and seldom obvious. (452)

The new socialist culture Trotsky envisioned could not be forced to adhere to a formula. He declared that "there is no proletarian culture" (185). Notwithstanding the idea that politics and literature have an interdependent relationship, for Trotsky this did not mean that the latter existed only to serve the former.

Before proceeding with an evaluation of how Birney's critical articles reflect his conscious alignment with the fundamental tenets of Trotsky's version of Marxist aesthetics, it would be informative to examine Birney's doctoral dissertation as an initial instance of this explicit alignment. In the "Acknowledgements" of his thesis, after acknowledging his "particular indebtedness" to

various academics, Birney ends with the inclusion of M. Spector. Maurice Spector was an important and inspiring Trotskyist leader in Canada. In his autobiography Birney recalls: "I was by nature the optimistic sort of revolutionary and decided to cast my dice with the creator of the Red Army [Trotsky] and his brilliant Canadian supporter, the Toronto lawyer Maurice Spector. The founding secretary of the Communist Party of Canada, he had been expelled with Trotsky when Stalin emasculated the Third International" (Spreading Time 27). When one discovers that Birney's dissertation was a Marxist critique of Chaucerian irony, the significance of Birney's acknowledgment of Spector becomes clear.

In his thesis, Birney makes the Marxist argument that Chaucerian discourse, inclined so extensively to literary irony, was produced by the tension between feudal and bourgeois ideology in late medieval culture. As a Marxist literary critic, Birney strives for additional insight into the dialectical, rather than unilinear, direction of the transition from feudalism to capitalism and connects the unevenness of this historical-political movement and its contradictions to the development of the literary ironist:

[T]he ironist succeeds, by his indirectness, not so much in softening the blow--often quite the contrary--but in removing himself from clear responsibility for the attack. It follows . . . that when society is sharply divided against itself, as during the height of the feudal-bourgeois struggle, there is little room for the ironist or even for the satirist

as such. But in epochs which lead up to or away from the primary social struggles, epochs of transition in which contradictions are most glaring but not immediately in battle, the ironist has his day. (Chaucer's Irony, I,i,2-3)

Although Birney works with the traditional Marxist model of "base" (mode of production of material life) and "superstructure" (the social, political and intellectual processes and institutions), he resists any vulgar, deterministic reflection of the former by the latter, and reiterates Trotsky's previous commentary on relative aesthetic autonomy: "a man does not feel in vacuo, but as a sensitive organism himself complexly related and delicately adjusted to the society in which and by which he lives, the formal expression of his emotion cannot be anything but conditioned by the same society . . . by the economic ground-plan upon which the whole superstructure is based" (V,23).

Birney's thesis considers Chaucer's actual class position amongst "the social struggles of his day" in chapter Five, and views his irony as the primary literary consequence of Chaucer's capacity to remain "invariably alert . . . to the shifting contradictions of society" (V,54). Just as significantly, the thesis also indicates Birney's particular Trotskyist focus on the "how" and "why" of Chaucer's "given tendency" to irony:

What is particularly potent, and at the same time clearly decipherable--though hitherto neglected in Chaucer criticism--is the direct influence upon Chaucer's literary expression

of the ambiguous class position in which Chaucer found himself, his responsive interest in the new vigorous world of the bourgeois, and his economic and social need to reconcile that interest with the duties of a courtier. It is with a discussion and exemplification of this life-long contradiction in Chaucer, and its resulting literary irony, that much of the present study will be concerned. (V,55)

Birney's initial exploration of Trotsky's Marxist aesthetics in his PhD thesis established a set of politically informed aesthetic criteria that conditioned the literary reviews and critical articles he contributed later to leftist journals and, more extensively, to the Canadian Forum. An article that Birney wrote for the leftist magazine, The Link, in 1936, was shaped explicitly by Trotsky's position in Literature and Revolution on the concept and program of a proletarian culture as well as by Trotsky's contention that creative-writing should be deferred until the political goal of establishing a truly human, classless society through revolution is achieved:

I would want my "proletarian" literature to be none the less literature because it was proletarian. There is nothing too good for the worker; anybody who tries to excuse bad craftsmanship in a poem on the grounds it was written to or by a worker, is really insulting the working-class with second-rate goods. On the other hand I would not expect the impossible; I would tell myself that a real rich working-class literature is not likely to develop so long as books are sold, like everything else, competitively for profit; and I would therefore not allow my reading of proletarian literature to interfere with the bigger job of helping to organize my fellow workers towards the establishment of a society where writers will be free to express themselves without

starving or turning intellectual traitors.
(Nesbitt 1981,178)

This intense commitment to Trotsky's aesthetics is reflected in many of Birney's Canadian Forum articles after 1936. Birney recognized quickly, as he assumed the position of literary editor for the Forum, that the magazine's political editor, Frank Underhill, was "shrewd and informed enough to know that as a Trotskyist" he would "not accept the Stalinist notion that a piece of writing was better because it was written by a 'proletarian' or even by virtue of its being about one" (Spreading Time 29). Birney's review of German revolutionary Ernst Toller's autobiography indicates his alignment with both Trotsky's aesthetics and politics:

Proletarian art, as the art of class-conscious and struggling men, can be little more than a lucky incident in a career primarily devoted to the more direct and urgent tasks of political argument and political struggle. It is the paradox of that struggle that the worker-writer must be ready to sacrifice his own artistic fruition in order that the heritage of past cultures, bourgeois among them, may be rescued and preserved and a finer society attained-- a society which will unfold no earthly paradise but in which the artists of the future will have room to build upon the creative achievements of mankind. ("Proletarian Literature," 60)

In this review, Birney addressed Trotsky's two fundamental issues on the cultural value of the past and Proletkult. Birney expanded and elaborated upon these concerns throughout most of his criticism in the Forum. More particularized commentaries extend to C. Day Lewis' The

Friendly Tree which is commended because it "does not grow into a 'proletarian novel'", although its hero "is a communist" ("Love and Mr. Lewis", 29). A.A. Brown's The Tree of Resurrection is censured for writing down to the proletariat: "Of the forty-two poems, only one mentions so local and ephemeral a being as a coal miner; he is a naughty fellow, who is punished for his amorousness by a creepy supernatural death in a folksy sort of mine." Birney extends his critique to Brown's failure to engage socially and politically with the issue of the Spanish Civil War: "The one other incursion into the world of the flesh is a warning to the Spanish that if they go on killing each other they won't be able to 'build the fair creation their wiser fathers willed'--whatever that means. Elsewhere Miss Brown speaks of war only in terms of silver trumpets and gold adornings" ("Moon-Wist," 33). Stephen Spender's edition of Poems for Spain is criticized, in greater detail, for its highly selective treatment of the same war:

In all these [poems] there is betrayed . . . a careful editing in the interests of the prestige of the Third International [The Communist Party in Stalinist Russia]. There is a conspicuous absence, in the midst of many translations from the Spanish, of any of the marching and fighting songs of the revolutionary anarchists . . . Nor is there any reflection of what was reflected in Spanish Loyalist literature, the worker-seizure of Barcelona factories. One short song of Herbert Read's poem celebrates the communizing of an olive grove. The dominant note of the volume is in contrast, liberalistic . . . imbued with the intellectual's ignorant contempt for political theory. ("New Byronism," 31)

Birney displays an even more intense sympathy with Trotsky's literary position in his mixed review of Spender's pamphlet, The New Realism:

He [Spender] comes to conclusions somewhat similar to those developed fifteen years ago by Trotsky in "Literature and Revolution," namely, that bourgeois writers who want to become proletarians must take the risk of getting killed, becoming politicians only, or in other ways ceasing to remain artists. . . . But where Trotsky would ask the socialist artist today to sacrifice his art for political action in order that culture may be saved for the future, Spender rather thinks that artists are special people who should remain artists, "write about the kind of life they know best," and so ensure that there will be a culture worth saving. (134)

Other articles in the Canadian Forum express Birney's aesthetic determination to develop a reasonable Marxist response to Stalinist distortions like Proletkult. Birney gives a clear response in his commentary upon the American author James T. Farrell's Notes on Literary Criticism. His appreciation of these Notes, a Marxist polemic written by Farrell in opposition to the political manipulation of literary judgement advocated by the socialist realists (proponents of "proletarian culture") of Stalinist Russia, confirms Birney's continued acceptance of Trotsky's flexible, non-prescriptive, Marxist aesthetics:

Farrell has properly reminded the Communist Party literati that "bourgeois" and "proletarian" are, as regards art, terms of description rather than categories of value. It is the job of the pamphlet he says, to express political theory systematically; fiction is trying to make "men understand this world more clearly, feel life more

keenly, more quickly, more sensitively, more imaginatively. In this way it plays its role in changing the world." Nevertheless it is Farrell's own tacit acceptance of class-struggle socialism, his Marxist understanding of the world, which gives him the drive to make others feel and imagine. ("Fiction of James T. Farrell," 23)

Alan Wald, in his analysis of the anti-Stalinist left in The New York Intellectuals, corroborates Birney's opinion of Farrell's aesthetic alignment with Trotskyism:

In the United States the most important creative artist significantly influenced by Trotskyism was James T. Farrell. Although his critical writings of the 1930s and 1940s defended modernist writers against narrow-minded "philistines" of both the right and the left, he was also very concerned with fostering nonelitist literature that communicated the life experiences of the plebeian classes. This did not mean, however, that Farrell exaggerated the merit of a literary work because of the virtue of its political line or the class origin of the author. (220-21)

As this review of Birney's Forum articles indicates, Trotsky provided him with an informed and intelligent political and cultural alternative to the official practice of the Soviet Union--where the logic of Stalinist cultural and political policy meant unnecessary restrictions both on the proletariat, who needed to acquire and rework all past culture, and on the gradual, organic evolution of bourgeois culture in a newly socialist society. That Birney was opposed to these restrictions in the thirties is also reflected in the aforementioned political correspondence with Trotsky and in his other "political essays under

pseudonyms for New York journals, and manifestoes, leaflets, programs and speeches for a Canadian organization which the War Measures Act had . . . driven underground" (Spreading Time 47).

What has been implied and must be stressed at this point, then, is the consistency of Birney's aesthetic position. As late as 1939, he still adhered to Trotsky's most fundamental principles on literature and politics. He reviewed John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath favorably for its aesthetic and political commitment--a review that clearly suggested he was not averse to evaluating literature in terms of its revolutionary qualities but remained opposed to seeing it turned into propaganda, or "proletarian literature":

This is no 'proletarian novel.' It is rather the only thing a class-conscious artist can write so long as the working people of the earth--of our Canadian Prairies too--suffer and die like this under their economic overlords. Steinbeck has no pseudo-Marxist hero from the Daily Worker office organizing the farmers along with their bosses into Leagues for Peace and Democracy. These proletarians of the soil are in the bitter process of learning for themselves in their own terms what wage-labour and capital mean, of creating for themselves fire-hardened leaders and cadres for the coming revolution. ("A Must Book," 94-95)

The continuing presence of a socialist influence on Birney's aesthetics is also demonstrated when he defends and develops Trotsky's principles in an evaluation of contributions to a

short-story contest he initiated for the Forum:

The bulk of the stories were predictably proletarian . . . But to be a proletarian artist it is not enough to voice the protests of the workers; it is necessary to be an artist, to shape material painstakingly into an illusion of life. . . . Such writers are, perhaps, not sharp enough Marxists to realize there is nothing too good for the worker, who should not be written down to any more than he should be written up to, and that it is surely the business of proletarian literature to make, out of the half-realized emotions and incoherent thoughts of workers, some clear, coherent and moving representation of their lives. ("Short-Story Contest," 96-97)

The discussion in this chapter has shown that Birney's critical writing is clearly influenced by Trotsky's Marxist aesthetics. But just what does Birney's alignment with Trotsky's ideas on the cultural value of the past and the impossibility of a "proletarian culture" tell us about the kind of poetry he would write in the forties and the early fifties? To begin, we could expect that Birney's poems would not be written down to the proletariat, in terms either of their form or content. Birney did not sympathize with the workers simply because they were an oppressed class or were uneducated aesthetically, but, more importantly, because the aims of the revolution could only be achieved through their solidarity. Because of his affiliation with Trotskyism, and in order to contribute politically, not just aesthetically, to the education of the proletariat, one might look to Birney's poems for a dialectical confrontation

with, rather than a mechanical reflection of, the social-political issues of the day.

With Trotsky's ideas on the relative autonomy of art also paramount in Birney's poetics, one might expect a poetry that was technically sophisticated and that drew on the full range of the tradition in English poetry. On the other hand, the images and symbols of the poems would be concrete, the revolutionary understanding they express would be more collective than individual, and the treatment of traditional themes, like nature, war and love, would evoke a social reality, not merely an aesthetic or philosophical discourse.

Although he writes from a Marxist point of view, one might anticipate that Birney's poetic judgements and evaluations will not be vulgar or mechanistic; the economic "base" will not be forced to emerge or peer out of his poems, nor will the "class struggle" burst out predictably. Nonetheless, because of his continued commitment to socialism, Birney will read history as a socialist. The analysis of the causes of human misfortune will concentrate on economic determinants, on political ideologies, on relations of production, on systemic as opposed to individual failures in our civilization. We should listen, then, to hear the legitimate, materialist claims of an objective historical process and a determined resistance to those who would revise history to suit their interests. In

the final analysis, we might expect from Birney's early poetry an undeniable care for the revolutionary goals and historic interests of the working class, viewed not from the height of ruling class ideology but from the perspective of those whom history has oppressed.

Chapter Three
Socialism and Poetry: Culture and Society
on Trial in Earle Birney's Early Poetry

A reader acquainted with much of Earle Birney's poetry, but uninformed concerning his years of political activism, may find it difficult at first to account for the existence of a socialist imprint on his early verse. Critical response over the past five decades, as we have seen, has not been particularly interested in, nor attentive to, the impact of Birney's commitment to Marxism on his first decade as a publishing poet. This is all the more remarkable given the relative ease with which one is able to identify and document the presence of a particular Trotskyist imprint on Birney's aesthetic orientation immediately before he began to write and publish the poems collected in his first four volumes.

A close reading of the verse from this ten-year period indicates no diminishment of political influence from volume to volume; in fact, the socialist imprint intensifies as we move from David and Other Poems to Now is Time and then sustains that level of intensity in The Strait of Anian and Trial of a City and Other Verse. In order to establish this uniformity, we shall proceed generally through the four volumes in a chronological fashion and attempt to establish a way of reading the poems that enriches them by

highlighting their embodiment of a socialist politics. The fundamental focus of the reappraisal will be on how socialism has influenced Birney's treatment of "traditional" themes like nature, war and love in the poems he writes during this period.

Birney's poetry up to 1952, collected in David and Other Poems (1942), Now is Time (1945), The Strait of Anian (1948) and Trial of a City and Other Verse (1952), is clearly informed by a conscious attention to the social and political implications of his subject matter. His many poems about the war range from a consideration of its underlying ideological conflicts of imperialism, capitalism and fascism to the dehumanizing consequences these conflicts have on individual consciousness. More often, Birney approaches the war as a measure of how we have failed miserably at building a humane civilization. Birney's earlier active commitment to Trotsky's revolutionary vision endures in the form of a generalized political sympathy for the eradication of class exploitation and leads to a poetry that describes oppression and urges the need for a politically conscious proletariat. Even Birney's nature poems demonstrate the impact of his politicized consciousness through their association with aggressive, militarized figures. This imagistic manifestation of Birney's socialist sensibility eventually evolves in the later volumes considered in our enquiry into poems

critically concerned with exploring the social attitudes and value systems contributing to the devastation of our natural environment. What we have seen to be the case of Birney as a literary critic, then, is equally true of Birney as a poet. He does not disguise his sympathies. He is devoted to historical accuracy in his creative writing and is indebted to Marxism for a poetic method which seeks to reveal the social, economic and ideological realities that shape the world that his poems engage.

By mid-1940, following the seven years he had devoted to Trotskyism (1932-1939), Birney's Marxist perspective might be most accurately characterized as that of a "fellow traveller," a term coined by Trotsky to describe intellectuals or writers no longer politically active but nonetheless loyal and sympathetic to the traditional Marxist cause of revolutionary international socialism (Swingewood 71). The political developments of the late thirties--the Moscow Trials, the Hitler-Stalin pact, and the subsequent Russian partitioning of Poland and invasion of Finland--left many socialist writers, both Stalinist and anti-Stalinist intellectuals, demoralized and disillusioned. Bruce Nesbitt, in his study of the Trotskyist aesthetic underlying Birney's political prose, speculates that Birney's disillusionment with radical left wing politics was mitigated by his prior opposition to the Communist Party: "Birney, as a Trotskyist, found that his anti-Stalin

sentiments insulated him from the shock which greeted many hard-core members of the C.P.C. [Communist Party of Canada]" (180). Birney's disappointment was further eased by his commitment to the war effort:

By mid-1940 . . . I decided . . . that this war of capitalist powers had become also a necessary struggle to prevent the world becoming totally fascist. . . . Stalin's Russia, which had made a pact with Hitler and had invaded Finland on the pretext of self-defense, was plainly no longer the workers' state Trotsky still believed it to be. It could not be relied on to defend Jews or to preserve any of the liberties that made life for me worth living. I dropped from the Marxist-Leninists and prepared to join the "war effort" in whatever way I could. (Spreading Time 47)

Frank Davey's account of Birney's disengagement from Trotskyism, based on a 1969 interview, confirms that Birney's disenchantment was with dogmatic party politics, not with the aims of socialism: "When Birney broke with Trotskyism in 1940, his argument was with the movement's means, not its ends" (68). Years later, in another interview with Peter Edwards concerning the relationship between his politics and his poetry at this time, Birney again indicated his continued sympathy with socialism despite his opposition to sectarian politics:

I quit politics--as far as being active--in 1940 when I decided to get into the war effort. I had become pretty disillusioned by that time with Marxism in practice. Even with Trotsky. I saw that Trotsky was willing to support Russia as the workers' state. And I felt it was no longer a workers' state, but a Stalin-dominated bureaucratic tyrannizing over the workers. Stalin was as bad as Hitler for moving people around and killing them. So I was disillusioned by Marxism

in practise, though I still felt I was a socialist. ("Politics and Poetry,"127)

In a review of John Lehmann's New Writing in the Canadian Forum in 1940, Birney's enduring commitment to Trotskyism's socialist principles expresses itself in his continued opposition to the ideological control of literature by Stalinists:

[I]nsofar as the contributors to New Writing had a common faith it was that of Stalinist Communism. . . . Many who were simply humanitarians without a party line were published, but nothing appeared which broke the serenity of those who followed the Great Democrat, Joseph Stalin. And so, although this issue is dated December 1939, it contains no hint of the world of Stalin-Hitler pacts, invasions of Finland, or, except most casually, even of wars with Germany. ("Death in Youth,"396)

Fellow writers in Canada who evaded responsibility through political neutrality, or by privileging matters of form over those of political content, did not escape Birney's attention. When the Hitler-Stalin pact disclosed Russia's actual role in World War II, Dorothy Livesay, as a Canadian Communist, experienced what she called "a shattering psychological blow" (Right Hand Left Hand 278). In an article which is central to Birney's critical position in the forties, "To Arms with Canadian Poetry," a satirical commentary on the anemic aesthetic and political response of much Canadian poetry to contemporary events, Birney addresses Livesay's disappointing output:

Miss Dorothy Livesay, from whom we had grown to expect some support of the war of the democracies against fascism, has also

disappointed us by . . . publishing in the Canadian Bookman an obscure piece entitled "2000 A.D." Here Miss Livesay asks the future if it will "comprehend our silence who today stifle the honest word?" Surely Miss Livesay is not implying that there are honest words that cannot now be uttered by any loyal citizens. (322)

Other poets are ridiculed for their inability to write any poetry at all--let alone poems that could be connected with the political realities of imperialism and war:

But what of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts,
Wilson McDonald, and other senior Bards?
We have heard nothing from them since the
war began. In such days as these may
not silence be treasonable? Nor will we
be fobbed off with wedges of geese in the
northern sky or the lisping of unbombed
Canadian children. The time has come when
nature is not enough. (322)

Birney refers ironically to the poetry of E.J. Pratt, however, as an exception to the abstract, disconnected poetic stances he viewed in Canada at this time: "In the last Canadian Forum . . . Dr. Pratt has printed a long composition which makes suitably unflattering references to Hitler, but the ditty seems to eschew the time-honoured phrases and images of patriotic poetry, and shows a dangerous tendency to treat war as in itself upsetting" (322).

Birney continued in this article to criticize Canada's "leading journals" for their critical disengagement from the war, for their "most disturbing rhythmical lethargy" (322). In another article, "War and the English Intellectuals,"

that appeared in 1941, in the Canadian Forum, while he was also busy writing his own poetry (soon to be published in his 1942 David volume), Birney suggested that the commitment to publishing poems about the political realities of the war by the apparently left-committed journals from across the ocean was similarly disappointing. Horizon, for instance, an English journal edited by Stephen Spender and Cyril Connolly, failed to publish any war poetry at all connected with the concrete political struggles of the day. Birney perceived the journal as having surrendered its radical discourse because none of its "compositions seem to have been affected by the war; most are over-written studies of eccentricity, dated and lugubrious, reading somewhat like Freud revamping Dickens." The poems were written by W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender, among others, and in Birney's judgement confused rhetoric with true adversarial politics-- "military realities" were treated either without their ideological complexity or historical facticity and gave evidence of a depoliticized poetics that Birney attributed to the magazine's editors who, "while considering the fighting a necessary and lesser evil to a Hitler peace, urged artists to ignore it, as a natural enemy to their art" (110-11).

This is the immediate context, then, in which I argue for a substantial reappraisal of Birney's first four volumes of poetry. The extended attention given here to preliminary

material serves to emphasize just how intensely implicated in history and politics Birney was when he began to write poetry. This account also verifies how Birney's continued adherence to a socialist aesthetic, with its basic proposition that art cannot escape, and at best must engage, the effects of its political and social environment, remains a critical influence and shapes his initial verse. What remains to be argued is how his first four volumes reflect their socially determined context and Birney's politicized consciousness.

In his initial volume, David and Other Poems, Birney chose to group together at the end of the collection poems that respond directly to the war, while poems concerned primarily with nature and society appear at the beginning, after "David." Commencing with the group of poems explicitly related to war enables us to begin tracing Birney's poetic engagement with history at an easy and obvious point of entry. Such poems as "Hands" and "Vancouver Lights" provide clear examples of Birney's practice of incorporating in his poems of this period the historical and political context of the war's opposing ideologies.

In "Hands," Birney uses the controlling metaphor, hands, to draw a distinction between the purposive violence of nature and the purposeless aggression of warring humanity:

the slim trees come bending
 Arching the palms of their still green hands . . .
 Here is the battle steeped in silence,
 The fallen have use and fragrantly nourish the
 quick.
 My species would wither, away from the radio's
 barkings,
 The headline beating its chimpanzee breast, the
 nimble
 Young digits at levers and triggers. (DOP 28)

Rather than developing into a withdrawn preoccupation with nature and man, the poem expresses the human side of this tension through a social-political critique: "Lithe are these balsam / Fingers, gaunt as a Jew's in Poland, but green, / Green, not of us, our colours are black and red" (DOP 28). With the reference to Poland and its Jewish population, Birney draws attention to the tragic plight of Polish Jews, subjected to mass deportation and extermination when Nazi Germany invaded Poland to provoke the war in 1939 and divided it up between themselves and Russia. Birney's allusions to the "red" and "black" colours of his "species" correspond to the blood and death of war. On the strictest historical and political level, Birney's choice of colours is not unrelated to the red and black flags flown by the totalitarian supporters of Stalin's Russia and Franco's Spain during the earlier Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). While the balance of the poem amplifies the contrast between a functional nature and a dysfunctional, brutal world of men at war, it concludes with Birney's despair and disillusionment over the failure of society to confront its

unnatural, deliberate inhumanity:

My fingers

Must close on the paddle. Back to the safedead
 Wood of the docks, the whining poles of the city,
 And to hands the extension of tools, of the
 militant typewriter,
 The self-filling patriot pen, back to the paws
 Claspig warmly over the bomber contract,
 Applauding the succulent orators, back to the
 wrinkled
 Index weaving the virtuous sock, pointing the
 witch hunt,
 While the splayed fist thrusts at the heart of
 hereafter.
 We are gloved with steel, and a magnet is set us
 in Europe
 We are not of these woods, we are not of these
 woods,
 Our roots are in autumn, and store for no spring.
 (DOP 28,29)

As much a source of Birney's anguish as the fascist
 brutality in Europe is the profiteering at home, in the name
 of freedom and democratic capitalism, by journalists,
 industrialists, and politicians.

"Vancouver Lights", Birney recalls, was first drafted
 while he was a student at the University of British
 Columbia, in the fall of 1924. He "digs it up" fifteen
 years later, in 1939, "under wartime compulsions" (Spreading
 Time 14,15). Birney revised and recontextualized the poem
 to place the poet on the edge of a mountain above the lights
 of Vancouver, with the world on the brink of World War II.
 In the second stanza, Birney makes a transition from the
 initial stanza's post-Romantic "height of land" perspective
 to historical and political considerations of the war. The
 World War II (artificially man-made) blackout, which the

poem depicts as flooding the universe, is juxtaposed with the natural darkness of night. The city, first described through a domestic metaphor ("quilt of lamps"), is now conveyed ambiguously as an oxymoron, "a troubling delight." Birney is ironically foreshadowing his historical allusion to the international context of the war and its spreading peril (note how the spreading peril is expressed through Birney's choice of verbs):

Now through the feckless years we have come to the
time
when to look on this quilt of lamps is a troubling
delight.

Welling from Europe's bog, through Africa flowing
and Asia drowning the lonely lumes on the oceans,
tiding up over Halifax, and now to this winking
outpost, comes flooding the primal ink.

(DOP 36; emphasis added)

The poet's individual reflection now shifts to a meditation on society's collective condition, a transition that completely dominates the balance of the poem. "I stir, of the changeless night" now becomes "We are a spark beleaguered / by darkness" (DOP 36). Birney's descriptive-reflective mode in the poem, conjoined with his idealist socialist vision, allows him to turn on the pivot between reflective detachment and political commitment. The light-dark contrast of the early stanzas is now a dialectical polarity, awaiting collective reconciliation, rather than a metaphysically unified opposition that hermetically seals the poem off from the dark realities of international war. This dialectical quality functions to acknowledge that the

As David Stouck has suggested, the poem "end[s] with a powerful statement on the irony of humanity's ambiguous powers" (101), but it is an irony clearly related to Birney's use of the Marxist dialectic for the political analysis in the poem which leads to his urgent appeal for reconciliation and true negotiation between world powers. Moreover, as is the case with his later poem, "Ulysses," Birney includes abundant mythical references not in order to generalize the war into a timeless expression of the human condition or some divine will, but in order to interrogate and dispute such mystifications: according to a materialist reading of history, it was humankind that fashioned its own dark history, and its own glory. If hope there be, this, for a dialectical materialist, is it; for what was made by humankind can be unmade and rebuilt.

Birney's other poems in this group are even darker in

tone than "Vancouver Lights." "Monody on a Century," for instance, laments the impending death of civilization that Birney envisioned occurring with the developments of the war. He begins with an apparently simple metaphorical link between the fragility of nature and the achievements of civilization: "The promise of our years was caught / As petals by the rose." What is critical about this equation is the manner in which it is later thematized in historical terms. The two terms are collapsed, in the concluding stanza, into a fatalistic image containing an implicit warning about the destructive forces of totalitarianism currently advancing in Europe:

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

Birney resists any aestheticization of violence or aggression in this poem. What is more, he articulates not only totalitarianism's restrictions of social freedom, but also, recalling his earlier opposition to the Stalinist concept of "proletarian culture," the danger of ideological control over any potentially revolutionary art.

Birney's cautionary appeals about the destruction of war and the ideological menace it held for contemporary civilization also informs "Dusk on English Bay," which similarly ends on an apocalyptic note of uncontrollable disaster:

On limbs unsexed and severed, and the rain of iron

Cooling the flesh, and the stench of the flesh cooled,
 While the flame untamed probes the tenement ruins.
 Speeding and soaring he comes, the Atlantic sighting,
 And there is no Joshua can brake his flight, nor
 Any clutch of ours can hold this precious night.
 (DOP 31)

The pensive and pessimistic tone of "European Nocturne" implicitly calls for the presence of reason, of a rationalized social contract, as these dark hours descend on our culture and society:

O when this Arabian magic ceases
 when the bottles of logic are empty of imps
 what Scheherazade will set soaring again
 our dusty carpets
 or beat them on the innocent line? (DOP 35)

In "On Going to the Wars," the poem which Birney chose to end his David volume, he confirms clearly the historical inevitability of this international conflict and the urgency he felt to counteract the destructive forces of fascism. The poem is a manifesto or justification for Birney's decision to enter the war. In keeping with his politics, it contains elements that refer to the pre-war peace and affirm the need for the construction of a new social order, not just the defeat of Hitler and Germany:

I pledge that if by chance I flee
 The klundering malice of the guns
 I'll stand by those who strive to chart
 A world where peace is everyone's,
 A peace that does not rot the heart
 With hunger, fear, and hopeless hate,
 Nor rust the cunning wheels nor still
 The subtle fingers, peace that will
 Unlock to every man the gate
 To all the leaping joys his hand
 Creates. (DOP 39)

As indicated earlier in this chapter, Birney placed those poems primarily about nature and society, and less directly concerned with the war, at the beginning of the David volume. Nonetheless, these poems still bear the imprint of his response to the war and his essentially socialist interpretation of life. While he waited to enter the war, with his gradual disillusionment over the disclosure of Russia's true role in the conflict and Trotsky's analysis of fascism impinging upon his critical and creative consciousness, nature could no longer be a simple source of affirmation or romantic meditation in his poetry. Aggressive, militarized figures invade his nature verse:

Veteran battalions of Alpine fir
 Defiled up the ancient battleslopes . . .
 The pines did guard duty,
 Lodgepole pines, straight and cold as
 gunbarrels. . . .
 When explosions of spruce were bursting at
 last
 at the foot of the cliffs, and the larch . . .
 Knelt pale in the wind that machinegunned down
 from the peak--
 With a crack and the roar of a thousand howitzers.
 ("Reverse on the Coast Range", DOP 17)

Of the bottlegreen sage and the carmined sumach
 and crimson
 Maple that bruise the ancient side of the elephant
 hill . . .
 Down smites the rain on the roofs, and the autumn
 dims on
 The mountain. . . . Slain is our summer, pulseless
 and chill. ("October in Utah", DOP 19)

COLUMNING up from crisscross rot . . .
 Breathes a single bullpine, naked
 for fifty cinnabar feet, then shakes
 At the valley a glittering fist of needles

Rivergreen. ("Kootenay Still-life", DOP 22)

Some of the poems in this group also exhibit Birney's particular concern with images of nature controlled and dominated within a capitalist social structure. Birney's critique in the poems contains anti-technology and anti-progress implications that remain consistent with his social vision. The narrator of "Waterton Holiday", opposed to the technological domination of nature and tired of both capitalism's pace and linearity, has finally managed to escape "from the straight / shrieking roads, the square fields, / the cubed implacable factory and the unendable hurry" (DOP 12). The ferry in "West Vancouver Ferry", despite floating on the contaminated waters of a "grease-black groaning slip," is content to "nudge along the piles and wait" in conformity with the exigencies of natural, tidal time. Unfortunately, the ferry's natural timing has failed to comply with the artificial, scheduled leisure of "one small tourist, angry and late" (DOP 16). The socialist vision that contributed to shaping these contrasts and oppositions between nature and society also helped condition this verse with a characteristic mix of satire and social critique. In "Grey Rocks," nature as affirmation ("WEBBED hands of balsam soothed the shore that night, / Consoling with a labouring tide") is contrasted ironically with the unnatural, intrusive sounds created by encroaching tourists and their technology: "Into the saga bobs the nervous, lean

/ Lament of ukeleles, and the choke / And belching of a motor" (DOP 20). The consoling power of nature takes on satirical implications in "Eagle Island," where Birney portrays Ontario as a "eunuch seal / And pastured fenced nonentity" and juxtaposes the province nostalgically and ironically with British Columbia's Eagle Island, where "still it's possible at night / To row unstabbed by neon light / or hounded by an auto's stench" (DOP 23,24).

In "Anglosaxon Street," Birney's satirical perspective turns from the technological assault upon nature to a treatment of the banality and triviality of urban malaise in capitalist society. The general movement of the poem is entropic--the gradual dwindling of all available energy amongst the proletarians of this non-community is paralleled formally by the progressive shortening of stanzas throughout the poem. Birney's parallel between the increasing trivialization / cessation of daily activity and the gradual diminution of stanzas is complete except for the second last stanza where he ironically inserts five lines describing the workers' eventual return home and the increased energy, "higher heartbeat," dutifully released in the sex act.

Birney combines political analysis with trenchant satire in "Anglosaxon Street" to expose the racism of the inhabitants in this overcrowded, working-class neighbourhood during World War II and their petty patriotism, roused by the jingoist propaganda of British

imperialism:

Here is a ghetto gotten for goyim,
 O with care denuded of nigger and kike.
 No coonsmell rankles, reeks only cellarrot,
 ottar of carexhaust, catcorpse and cookinggrease.
 Imperial hearts heave in this haven.
 Cracks across windows are welded with slogans;
There'll Always Be An England enhances geraniums,
 and V's for a Victory vanquish the housefly.
 (DOP 14)

He employs alliterative verse, octosyllabic couplets and the kennings of Anglo-Saxon literature to invoke the conventions of an earlier period in support of his satirical critique of urban existence under a capitalist mode of production:

What! after whistleblow, spewed from wheelboat,
 after daylong doughtiness, dire handplay
 in sewertrench or sandpit, come Saxontheegns,
 Junebrown Jutekings, jawslack for meat. (DOP 15)

These proletarians have no intention of absorbing and assimilating bourgeois culture in order eventually to transcend it, nor are they conscious of their historical role, which could only begin with an awareness of their cultural deficiency, according to Birney's Trotskyist comprehension. They are content merely to experience misdirected, momentary release after a day's work, rather than appropriate any of the positive gains of bourgeois culture:

Sit after supper on smeared doorsteps,
 not humbly swearing hatedeeds on Huns,
 profiteers, politicians, pacifists and Jews.

Then by twobit magic to muse in movie,
 unlock pictureboard, or lope to alehall,
 soaking bleakly in beer, skittleless. (DOP 15)

In the David volume, as was indicated earlier, Birney chose to begin with general satirical critiques like "Anglosaxon Street" and with nature poems indirectly marked by the war but still demonstrating a socialist imprint. The collection's final grouping contains poems that become more intensely and explicitly political, concluding with "On Going to the Wars," Birney's urgent, poetic justification for entering the war and fighting for a new social order. Ending the volume with such a heightened political response gave strong indications of the stance that Birney would take in his next collection.

In 1945, Birney published Now is Time, and it would appear that his active war-time experience contributed significantly to the sharper political focus which animates the twenty-two new poems of this post-war volume. Commenting on the volume in his book, Ten Canadian Poets, Desmond Pacey argued:

There is . . . a slight change of emphasis here, as in poem after poem Birney expresses his hope for a new social order after the War. Whereas David was dominated by a rather despairing sense that Canada was being drawn ineluctably into the vortex of a destructive World War, Now is Time is dominated by the determination that after the War a new society of love and reason must emerge. (310-11)

Pacey's comments are valid enough, but he pays little attention to the socialist world-view that animates, in large part, the volume's "determination" for a new social order. To begin with, one might note that the sequence, the

temporal ordering of the poems' arrangement, is ideologically aggressive. Birney's title (Now is Time) and his organization of verse in sections named "Tomorrow," "Yesterday" and "Today" create a definite sense of urgency, alerting his readers that this volume will not be a mere collection of occasional verse intended to soothe them while they bask in the glow of world peace.

The shorter poems in the "Tomorrow" section serve to express Birney's warning about post-war peace and his continued sense of apocalypse despite the war's end. In "Status Quo," Birney links the war to a system of production and the morality that sustains and masks it, not to evil individuals or treacherous nations:

Now every spraying syllable
veneering private gain
shall gloss another farmboy for
the toy-display of pain.

Rather than warn us against the bomb, Birney cautions against material processes like media manipulation, immoral practices like racism and politically aggressive policies of nationalism that produce the social-political conditions which give rise to war:

For ten lies from a radio
and twenty on a page
a hundred thousand charming eyes
will aim the atom's rage.

For every nose despised,
for each dishonoured skin,
steelpelted herds of elephants
will trumpet out our sin.

The boundaries of nations

wrinkle the heart of man
and rats in history's basement gnaw
the half-deciphered plan. (NiT 3)

In "Remarks for the Part of Death" and "Time-Bomb," Birney clearly articulates his apocalyptic theme, suggesting the failed brotherhood and human terror that lurk behind the facade of civilization:

Continue to grow, if you wish,
your dusty bushes of bombs
or suck the shell's dug in your mouth
--or come with paresis and psalms.
("Remarks for the Part of Death", NiT 4)

Within the politician's ribs,
within my own, the time-bombs tick.
O men be swift to be mankind
or let the grizzly take.
("Time-Bomb", NiT 6)

These poems indicate how Birney, as a socialist, expressed his sense of urgency, almost desperation, during the immediate post-war period. Birney consciously structures or frames these emotions in terms of the peace, rather than the war, to place critical attention upon the contemporary systemic social factors that predispose civilization to engage in war. This historical-materialist analysis of diverse systemic elements such as unequal distribution of wealth, racism and the profit-motive that contribute to war and continually threaten the attainment of a lasting peace constitutes the heart of his socialist vision. This materialist inquiry is most evident in the longer poems of this collection, like "Man on a Tractor,"

"Joe Harris" and "For Steve."

In "Man on a Tractor," a poem Birney placed in his "Tomorrow" section, the focus is on a returned soldier farming his land and contemplating the future that awaits him. His troubled thoughts alternate between the war ("Now with the breezes of home around me, / why do I daydream of tanks / and gulping compo with buddies scattered or dead?") and post-war peace: "there are no contortions of war that haunt him / so much, he thinks, as the lengthening shadows of peace" (NiT 7,8). Birney's "Man on a Tractor" sees peace not as a happy norm interrupted by the occasional war but as a system of social and economic relationships that are a phase of war, that lead inevitably to armed conflict. This perception leads to a systematized analysis, an insistence that both peace and war must be related to capitalist greed and the profit motive:

I have come through with my hands and feet
and won the right to plow black earth of my own--
though sprouting thicker than wheat are the towers
of its traders, shining more than the headstone
his father saved from a lifetime's farming.
This willing soil, and all his muscles, kindly seasons,
the faith
of a wife and the sweat of coming sons will not win,
if the far lords of profit and price deny them. (NiT 8)

Birney slips in and out of the man's consciousness to treat his depression experience subjectively ("we munched a stale handout, / planned against yardbulls ahead") and to convey an objective, materialist critique of middle-class complicity in the oppression of workers:

True, he thinks, it is not the tourists have robbed him
 once of a job and food and now of his brother--
 but their lives are consent to all that has been.
 They live by the throb of this iron in his chest,
 by the alternation of tractor, boxcar and tank,
 that others ride and sweat and hunger and die in.
 (NiT 8,9)

Tourists have not contributed directly to his years of unemployment in the depression, but their indirect support of the capitalist system acts as "consent to all that has been," an admission that reaffirms his "brother's" class analysis of a few stanzas earlier: "'It's because of them that we're here'" (NiT 9). This worker's combined farming, depression and war experiences ("tractor, boxcar and tank") have made him a pawn of imperialist and capitalist ideology, and have benefitted "They," the capitalists and imperialists, who live by the blood and sweat of the workers' sacrifices. The Marxist logic that informs Birney's patterning of history, embodied in the alternation of the man's three experiences, is interrupted towards the end of the poem. He expresses a vision of a socialist society not built on private property and a class structure: "the map of a reasoned future, of lands without private / traps, or hidden mortars of class," where "the bones of his brother have meaning" (NiT 10). The "thoughts of a man on a tractor" would not be "queer," "strange" or "odd" to fellow members of the working-class, Birney ironically suggests in the poem's final lines. But his thoughts would be considered "odd" to "some of the cool tourists" outside his

class, "moving on hired ponies under the poised avalanche," Birney's image of a working-class social revolution implied earlier with the insistence that "our time will come" (NiT 10).

"Joe Harris" continues Birney's socialist analysis of the actual class and economic conditions of those who chose to fight in the war, through a poetic representation of their consciousness or "thoughts." This poem, according to Birney in The Creative Writer, "invents a young Canadian soldier, wounded at Dieppe, who dies shortly after in England. The poem imagines what his thoughts might be if he were still able to think while being given a military funeral" (39). What is of critical importance, as regards tracing a socialist influence, is the manner in which Birney chooses to treat this representative soldier's life and death. His mother was from "the servant's cell of a Glasgow / snob" while his father was a farmer "talking of debt adjustment" (NiT 23). From this working-class background, Harris ends up later experiencing the depression, riding the rails and staying in relief camps (NiT 24). There can be no room in the poem, with this background, for an idealized presentation of a noble, brave young man choosing to forego a life of ease and fight for freedom. Harris recalls his death and those of others from the working class in the war as a choice between the lesser of two evils: "These deaths we died as we lived our lives, not by desire / but by

choice, as against a worse life and a meaner death" (NiT 25). Joe Harris speaks to his own kind throughout the poem and not to a generalized, middle-class Canadian audience. The essence of his solidarity is with a specific class, experience and social vision--a solidarity that leads to his death "for a creed, not a dogma." The young soldier refers to this basis for his commitment to the war effort earlier in the poem, when he denies religion as the ideological motivation for his entry and eventual death in the conflict, in order to affirm more personal values: "Yet it was nothing I / learned in pews or glossy books that brought me here / or availed me in these times, but only the gods that live / in such words as freedom, and truth, love, and reason" (NiT 26). Birney's idealist, utopian socialist vision is most explicit here, and near the poem's end when Harris declares he died "for a creed not a dogma." The vision becomes even more insistent when Harris issues an urgent plea at the poem's conclusion:

Comrades, it is not I who desire that you fire these
 rounds over me, nor intone the most beautiful ritual. .
 . . It will be good to lie here only if such as my son
 may go
 in no fear of mousy hunger, of yard-cops, and the
 slammed door in a Canada mildewed with the fat and
 unheeding. (NiT 27)

Birney's awareness of the worker sacrificed for, or victimized by, imperialist and capitalist ideology, so apparent in "Man on a Tractor" and "Joe Harris," is reflected even more intensely in the trenchant criticism of

"For Steve." In these longer poems Birney gives an extended demonstration of his ability to relate literary form to political analysis. Birney's tendency to write "elegies," as earlier critics like E.K. Brown have noted, is evident enough here (272). But what is also displayed is the quality Norman Geras discovered when he studied the "literary side of Trotsky's work" in his article, "Literature of Revolution":

[T]he literary side of Trotsky's work indicates . . . the subtlety and richness of his Marxist understanding. The density of literary texture, with its manifold levels of reference, reflects an underlying conceptual wealth. . . . Trotsky ranged over many areas of knowledge and aspects of human existence in an effort to fathom the complexities of history . . . seeing in the present struggle not only its immediacy and urgency or its obstacles and delays, but also its historical development and material basis. (18)

Geras' comments are directed specifically to his reading of Trotsky's My Life and are not inconsistent with Birney's evaluation of the same book, an evaluation that concentrated on Trotsky's ability to blend the literary and the political (Nesbitt 1981, 177).

"For Steve" continues Birney's systemic analysis of the conditions leading up to war and again centers on the utter waste and destruction of war as particularized in the death of a young man. Birney calls for some meaning to the sacrifice represented by Steve's death. That meaning is explicitly and strictly linked to Birney's virulent critique of the ideology and hegemony supporting the war; typically

the urgency and desperation that fuel the critique are addressed to the terms of a tenuous peace, not to those of an "anomolous" war. Steve's death was "Not for the dole, the family patent, the cartel, / the abattoir whitewashed for each crop of earthlings, / but for a peace, distant maybe as Arcturus, yet spinning white in the telescope of the heart" (Canadian Forum 1944, 112-13).

Birney develops his materialist analysis, replete with images of the cartels and the family patents of capitalism, into a more prolonged attack on the imperialists and capitalists who employed the working class to achieve their military objectives:

Our self-renewing lords who spell democracy
as private enterprise and public rape
may yet be wrong. That was another war, and we
are haunted by our frustrate fathers and the late
souring of a milksop truce, when Steves, with
brains
and hands alone to trade with, and no credit,
were paid in promises, or jailed, or warned off
freights
and politics and love, unless they peddled
the latest brightest stones to all who asked for
bread. (112)

With these lines, Birney explicitly aligns himself with the traditional internationalist position of "defeatism" advocated by Trotsky in a 1938 article, "Lenin and Imperialist War." This policy of "defeatism" recommended that, in conjunction with the struggle against fascism outside one's country, there should develop "a parallel struggle by the workers of each country against their own

imperialism, as their primary and most immediate enemy" (Wald 196). Birney's reference to "another war" in these lines is made to point out how Canada contributed to the support of the imperialist war, World War I, that in many respects was the overture to World War II. With the systemic conditions of competitive capitalism and aggressive imperialism still in place, along with The Depression and glutted markets, Birney suggests that war was merely adjourned, in the period between these conflicts, and there really was no peace.

Birney's perception of the ideological complexity of imperialism and his appreciation of the "parallel struggle" implied by Trotsky's policy of "defeatism" influence the deeper, sharper invective of the poem's next stanza:

Take warning you who opened once your long
thick ears to Munich's taloned doves, and closed
your eyes to Spain, who hate the habitant,
the Jew, the union--these wraiths are still your
foes.
Not only all whom Goebbels dupes but those
more fearful of tomorrow than of Hitler
should court the motley gathering hosts.
Alive or ghosted, they are spirits not dispersed
by mouldy arguments from history's old murders. (112)

Birney insists on letting history and politics speak in these lines. He satirizes the duplicity of the agreement signed by Britain, Germany, Italy and France in 1938 at Munich ("Munich's taloned doves"). The agreement, negotiated hastily to avert war, actually allowed for the surrender of Sudetenland to Nazi Germany (without Czech

consent). Rather than appease Hitler, these negotiations actually encouraged further aggression when Hitler seized what was left of Czechoslovakia in 1939. The satirical critique is extended further with Birney's reference to Canada, the "you who opened once your long / thick ears to Munich's taloned doves," as an imperialist pawn listening to, but not understanding, the pre-war negotiation. John Herd Thompson, in his book Canada 1922-1939, documents historically the tragic irony of Canada's position concerning Munich and implicitly concurs with Birney's satirical stance:

People soon learned more about central Europe than they cared to know. With Austria in his hands, Hitler reached out for the Sudeten-deutsche areas of Czechoslovakia, and throughout the summer of 1938 Canadians watched in horrified fascination the desperate British attempts to find a way out short of war. . . . To King's, Canada's, and the world's immense applause, Chamberlain produced a solution. The Czechs would lose a third of their territory, but Hitler promised to take it from them in a gentlemanly fashion and to take no more. . . . Munich was the turning point on Canada's road to war. (324-25)

Birney sharpens his criticism of Canada's role in the war when he characterizes our country as "you who . . . closed / your eyes to Spain, who hate the habitant, the Jew, the union." Canada's non-intervention in Spain, prescribed by the Foreign Enlistment Act of 1937 (Thompson 318) and in

compliance with Britain's policy of non-intervention, called for the imprisonment of Canadians who volunteered to fight in Spain. Despite the courageous, but severely limited, efforts of the MacKenzie-Papineau battalion of volunteer soldiers who fought Franco and his fascist allies, Canada isolated itself from the civil war in a position of "imperial unity" with Britain. The charge against Canada for closing its eyes in hatred for "the Jew," is also addressed by Thompson, who again confirms the historical accuracy of Birney's allegations:

Canada's response to the flood of 800,000 Jews who poured out of Europe to escape the concentration camps was to raise the dam of immigration restrictions still higher. Only four thousand were accepted between 1933 and 1939, by far the smallest number in proportion to population among those countries that took the refugees in. (322)

Birney's related charge concerning Canada's enmity for the "habitant," re-articulated later in his description of the French-Canadian soldier Trudeau in Turvey, can be read as his recognition of English Canada's misrepresentation of French Canada's isolationism during the World War II. The basis of this isolationist policy was opposition to conscription and willingness to confront the imperialist nature of this conflict, not pacificism or cowardice, according to Maxime Raymond, leader at that time, of the isolationist bloc in the federal Liberal caucus:

[E]very Canadian citizen has the military obligation of defending the soil of his motherland . . . but no one is entitled to ask

them to go and shed their blood in Europe, or
in Africa, or in Asia for the greater power
and glory of another country, even if that
country should be England or France.
(Wade 856)

The intensity of Birney's response to the underlying conditions and systemic features of both war and peace increase, if anything, in this volume. Moreover, the focus of the response broadens and deepens in its treatment of other traditional topics like love and nature. The ways in which Birney's earlier concern for nature and society enter into his treatment of love in this volume are consistent with the socialist mentality in his verse at this time. His approach to love involves no romantic escapes or sentimentalized flights of fancy, for, as Bruce Nesbitt argues, love is not "an instrument of obliterating therapy" in Birney's poems (1974, 29).

For many of the poems, love is part of a response to the conditions of war and cannot be separated from a social context. In "Cadet Hospital," for instance, a young cadet is receiving treatment for a fracture, "gnawing under the cast." While his radio reception is interfered with by taxi dispatches, he looks distractedly out his window at fellow-cadets strolling by:

The hale roll past, who were our comrades;
this night the dance, the graduation tomorrow,
then the far shores and the devil's forge.
(NiT 21)

These healthy cadets are described significantly in the past tense ("who were . . . comrades"), an ominous prefiguration of the fatal consequences awaiting them in "the far shores and the devil's forge" after their "graduation" into active combat. Despite an effort to remain at least visually connected with the outside community, through the "window's meagre mouth," the injured cadet's consciousness retreats momentarily from the confusion and dissolves into a consoling memory of a loved one's voice:

Now the cacophony somehow
melts in the mead of a voice remembered.
I shut my eyes and find the gentian
of yours, and the gnawing under the cast
is quieted by a touch from the past.
(NiT 21)

Birney produces a transition (within this poem) from the material conditions of war-experience to the affirmation of a remembering consciousness. This shift clearly suggests the poet considering how social environment affects the consciousness of the individual. Similarly, in "The Road to Nijmegen," Birney sees and becomes conscious of a loved one amidst the horror and destruction of war in this Netherlands port:

Numbed on the long road to mangled Nijmegen . . .
searching my heart for the hope of our minds,
for the proof in the flesh of the words we wish,
for laughter outrising at last the rockets,
I saw the rainbow answer of you. (NiT 42)

"Death of a War" consolidates much of what we have been arguing about in terms of the influence of socialism on

Birney's treatment of love in a social context. The war is over, but the social and economic conditions that produced it continue to exist throughout the world. We, the "killer-creators," are capable of both destroying and building and are free now, once more, to choose between them; we have the "levin of reason" to guide us. Human society ("We of the Janus brain") is still in chaos despite the "death" of the war, and it is strictly up to us to decide whether by reason and love to rebuild and reorder society, or by unreason and hatred cause it to disintegrate completely:

Like the girders of a great bridge rusting
unassembled, obscure in the dust
of their stirring, lie
the separate races of man.

Still the heart is a metal vibrant
to love in his lightning searches.
Within yet trembles our will
To move as electrons alert to his passage,
To rise from our dirt and fulfil
the architect's message. (NiT 53,54)

The complex response of hope and despair running throughout the poems of Now is Time and animated by Birney's socialist evaluation of culture and society does not diminish in Birney's next collection, The Strait of Anian. Rather than being arranged temporally to create the sense of urgency we witnessed in Now is Time, Birney organizes this volume spatially into two sections, "One Society" and "One World." This choice of structure still suggests that Birney's nineteen new poems will demonstrate his pressing concern for international collective action and the

achievement of a post-war peace based on a social ethic of sharing. Birney's radical discourse, no longer concentrating solely on the war and its attendant ideological conflicts, produces poems that examine man's destructive tendencies towards nature and indigenous peoples, features of technology and progress that undermine our hopes for a truly humane civilization. The volume's categories and the concerns of its poems, then, implicitly attest to Birney's continued adherence to the spirit of Trotsky's internationalist perspective; he remains committed to the vision of a universal, socialist conception of the "good society."

Some of the poems form part of a comprehensive critique that includes man's exploitation of nature and Canada's oppression of its indigenous people--making it quite clear that Birney's perception of the postwar world remained critical and pessimistic, despite the war-time hopes that many had entertained for a genuine change in social values. "New Brunswick," for instance, is a poem concerned fundamentally with man's violation of nature:

Behold this great green girl grown sick
with man, sick with the likes of you. . . .
Pause where maggoting miners bore her bones
to feed your crawling host . . .
and in her lakeblue eyes the scum of tugs
and in her blood the clogging logs
ensure you continuity of travel folders. (SA 6)

Nature's destruction, in this poem, clearly implicates capitalism and its industrial technology. Similarly,

"Laurentian Shield" expresses Birney's criticism of the environmental exploitation he saw around him:

Not here the rooted home but only discords
the logger sounds, tarpaper shanty scored . . .
and little wounds upon the rocks the miner
makes and leaves at last to mending snow.
(SA 11,12)

Birney combines this criticism of nature's destruction with a portrait of the exploitation of indigenous peoples in "Montreal." Indigenous people, those who lived closest to the socialist ideal for which Birney continued to strive, were displaced and driven out of New France as it became dominated by European religious and economic interests:

THIS is New France, the oldest France alive,
where Church is more than state and less than
stock-exchange . . .
Where the medicine man died of measles,
the pioneer of the arrow,
drive now the pale psychiatrist and priest.
Here Bretons uprooted the wigwam. (SA 8,9)

The ironical contrast, "where church is more than state and less than stock-exchange," asserts an integrated, mutually sustaining hierarchy of financial, religious and government institutions that doomed the Indian cultures to extinction. Rather than being the independent and disinterested centre of rational decision-making posited by capitalist political theory, the state is portrayed in practice as the agent of specific economic and religious interests. Reigning over the crosses on Mount Royal are the symbols of industrial and financial power:

But higher still above the climbing crosses,
above the convent and the lubberly college . . .

shoot factories' cannon and the railroads'
palaces. (SA 8)

Nature, in this scheme of things, is similarly the slave of
economic power:

The trapped Lachine treads out its life
to power Champlain's tinselled cross,
illuminate the lovers and the tycoon's Gothic.
(SA 9)

Birney's class analysis of life in capitalist society
is most incisive in "The Ebb begins from Dream." Similar to
"Anglosaxon Street," the poem develops an urban picture of a
city waking and going to work. Birney uses the nature
imagery of the sea's waves, ebbing and flowing, to describe
the tide of working masses dragging themselves daily from
their sleep to their places of work only to ebb back home to
sleep and dream at the end of each day:

[T]he workers slip reluctant, half-asleep,
lapse back into the city's deep.
The waves of factory hands and heads, of salesman
eyes and dulling waitress faces. (SA 14)

The stark, dehumanizing quality of modern capitalist life is
not restricted to the working class. Birney extends his
analysis to include the more privileged classes, who are
also caught in the system's relentless alternation:

And late, from tortuous coves in Forest Hill
and Rosedale, sets the sinuous undertow
of brokers, and the rolling politicians flow
to welter in the one pelagic motion. (SA 14)

Birney concludes the poem, however, with a revolutionary
vision. The endless cycle, associated with capitalism,

provokes a crisis that need not lead to the disintegration of our civilization. For a constructive force has been created and is sleeping within the womb of the old order. The solidarity of the working class will help it rise to emancipate itself from exploitation and free the entire world from the fetters of capitalist relationships:

Now tide is full and sighing creeps
into the clean sought coigns of sleep.
And yet in sleep begins to stir,
to mutter in the dark its yearning,
and to the round possessive mother turning
dreams of vaster wellings, makes the last cliff
totter,
cradles all the globe in swaying water.

The ebb begins from dream. . . . (SA 15)

In "Prairie Counterpoint," Birney uses more social-political analysis to point out the systemic factors leading to a prairie farmer's domination by technology and the alienation and break-down of traditional values that reflect the negative consequences of the philosophy of progress. The poem alternates stanzas of dialogue and description to create an ironic tension between an old farmer's social concerns and the perpetual, beneficent cycles of nature; both are slowly being encroached upon by a technological progress that is guided by the profit motive. Birney's descriptive stanzas focus on the banal existence of two youths from the prairie, while the local proletarian gives a monologue on the life of the father of these two boys, an old prairie farmer. As the poem's title implies, two value

systems will be "counterpointed" through this method of intercalation: that of the time-wasting young men devoid of any work ethic as they sit in their car, waiting "in their dust at the crossing," and their father's way of life, which included years of toil to purchase the newest and biggest technology:

Aint never took a rest; worked hard he has;
got a good farm now, biggest in the district.
You oughta see his barn; all the new gadgets,
and big, big as they make em. (SA 17)

Like Abe Spalding, in Fruits of the Earth, the farmer has planted the seeds of his own destruction. Congruent with the technological gadgetry of competitive capitalism that now dominates the prairie farming community, the farmer's sons have drifted away from the communitarian values that initially bound their father to the land in a spirit of communal interest. Birney is subtly pointing out how, in capitalist society, workers like this farmer are increasingly under the domination and power of their technology; in the ideal socialist society envisaged by Marxism, the machinery of production would be in the service of the farmers. The technological advances and increased efficiency have alienated the sons from the traditional family farm and the city draws them away: "Young folks is different now. Cant tell em nothin. / They figger more excitement in the city" (SA 18). Birney thematizes capitalist alienation more graphically in his final

description of "the two youths." They wander aimlessly, only to fill their transient lives with empty entertainment and furtive sexuality:

Till dusk they gurgle time in cokes
and boom the jukebox in the corner drugstore.
Expectant foursome then, forearmed
with barber's bootleg and the druggist's rubber,
they drive along an empty road
and park in the darkening thistled ditch. (SA 20)

Birney underscores the opposition between a traditional economy based on shared work and natural abundance and an industrialized system fixated on commodities and efficiency by repeating the poem's first two lines immediately after this description of devalued, fragmented relationships. Economically and ideologically, capitalism demands the transfer of value from the productive hinterland to its profit center in the east:

The wheat flows east in the wind
brimming the land's plate. (SA 20)

Birney's materialist inquiry, as we have seen, probes the political and economic determinations of class-divided society and commodified culture as he moves through poems dealing with the Maritimes, Quebec, Montreal, to Toronto in the centre, and then out to the prairies and the Rockies. The point of the critique lies in Birney's commitment to the struggle for international socialism that must be waged if the idea of a universal human fellowship is ever to prosper over the business-dominated civilizations he so despised. "Pacific Door" succinctly conveys Birney's historical sense

of the nationalist-imperialist interests fuelling
destructive tendencies and his invocation of a utopian,
internationalist, socialist community:

Here Spaniards and Vancouver's boatmen scrawled
the problem that is ours and yours,
that there is no clear Strait of Anian
to lead us easy back to Europe,
that men are isled in ocean or in ice
and only joined by long endeavour to be joined.
(SA 37)

The three concluding poems of The Strait of Anian, "Man
is a Snow," its complementary piece, ". . . or a Wind," and
"World War III," consolidate Birney's perspectives on nature
(environment) and war, and reflect critically on their
social and political dimensions. The opening lines of "Man
is a Snow" form a couplet, set off dramatically from the
rest of the poem: "I TELL you the wilderness we fell / is
nothing to the one we breed" (SA 80). Functioning as an
interpretative signal, these lines construct a distinctive
clash between man's actual, externalized relationships with
nature, the one we exploit, and our internal wilderness, the
idealized conception of nature that is created as a
replacement. Birney proceeds to demystify this fabricated
nature by pointing to the realities of war, death and
poverty that this illusion attempts to conceal:

Not the cougar gliding to myth
from the orange lynx of our flame
and the saw's bright whine,
but the tree resurrected in slum
in rotograved lie
and a nursery of crosses in Europe. (SA 80)

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MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART
NATIONAL BUREAU OF STANDARDS
STANDARD REFERENCE MATERIAL 1010a
(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)

We mechanically mass produce death but gloss the issue.
 Opposed elements are balanced in the poem, through syntax
 and image, to contrast the two wildernesses, using the
 distance between them to call attention to the economic
 greed and underlying political strategies:

Not the death of the buffalo grass
 in the wheat's monotonous flooding
 but that we harvest in doubt
 and starve in the hour of hoarding.

Not the rivers we foul but our blood
 rushing more devious and colder. (SA 80)

The opening line of the final stanza, Birney's second
 repetition of the poem's title, evokes an apocalyptic sense
 of what occurs when men keep their hearts in perpetual
 winter, freezing to death the life around them as well as
 their own:

Man is a snow that winters
 his own heart's cabin
 where the frosted nail shrinks in the board
 and pistons the brittle air
 while the ferns of the lost world unfurling
 crusten the useless windows. (SA 80)

". . . Or a Wind," constructed on the assumption that
 humanity must make the choice between being a "snow" or a
 "wind," reinforces a renewed optimism about the fate of
 humanity in an attempt to balance Birney's chilling
 skepticism in the previous poem. Rather than remaining
 contained by this skepticism, Birney uses the traditional
 image of the wind as the force needed to push us above and
 beyond our tendency to "coil upon ourselves." If humanity

can muster the necessary will to be a "wind," Birney concludes, in a utopian, revolutionary vision of social transformation, the momentum may yet carry us to freedom:

O we may yet roar free, unwhirl,
sweeping great waves into the deepening bores,
birging the ocean to boom and fountain and siren,
tumbling the fearful clouds into a great sky
wallowing,
cracking the mountain apart--
the great wind of humanity blowing free, blowing
through,
streaming over the future. (SA 81)

"World War III" is a cautionary poem composed entirely of rhetorical questions. Sandwiched between the opening queries of the initial and concluding stanza ("Will it be much as before?" and "Or will it be something quite new?") are thought-provoking questions pertaining to the social-political issues of Birney's poetry from all three volumes. While ". . . Or a Wind" confirmed that as late as 1947 Birney still maintained a rigorously internationalist perspective, "World War III" demonstrates that he would not refrain from expressing the problematic aspects of a new political and social order. A series of satirical questions continue to align Birney with Trotsky's internationalist position of "defeatism" (a parallel struggle against the imperialists of one's country and the enemy's):

Of course we shall play the role of the chicks,
but who will be dressed up as falcons?

Shall we both fight superbly and sometimes with
wrath,
bemedal the brave and the bold psychopath
the captains of industry, colonels or better . . .

Will it be much as went by . . .
 and no time left to recall a depression?
 when plagues are confined to the backward races.
 (SA 82)

More sardonic interrogations are aimed at the involvement of American imperialism in a future conflict, ("Will even Americans eat much less, / restrict their water as well as their press, / and bleed in the corner store?"), the ability of scientific technology to "find / a method with plasma and plastic mind / to keep nearly everyone half-alive?" after another war, and the threat of nuclear war he anticipates as the "something quite new?" in the form of "pale clouds" casting "their seed" and resulting in "twoheaded children" (SA 83). The severely limited optimism at the poem's end barely conceals Birney's fears and frustrations concerning the possibilities of fundamental social change in a capitalist society tightly controlled by imperialist ideology:

can the brain teach the heart what to do?
 Can love bend the earth to his will,
 can we kill only that which drives us to kill,
 and drown our deaths in a Creed? (SA 83)

Birney's social-political critique and restrained optimism persist in his next collection of verse. So far, Birney has been rendering his judgement of the structures and processes of our culture and society through a consistent, relatively explicit critique in his poems. In 1952, some twelve years after his disengagement from active

socialism, Birney published Trial of a City and Other Verse, a volume directly concerned with putting modern Vancouver, a city that exemplifies our civilization's many systemic faults, on trial. In so far as the poems of Birney's initial three collections have been weighing the evidence and making a case supporting our social and cultural impoverishment, the poetry of Trial of a City and Other Verse functions to deliver Birney's verdict.

For three summers, following the publication of his novel Turvey in 1949, Birney "worked on a radio-play in verse and a selection of poems that was to appear in 1952 as Trial of a City and Other Verse" (Aichinger 26). In the preface to Words on Waves, a recent collection of his radio plays in their original versions, Birney offers the following as a context for his verse-drama, "Trial of a City":

In August [1951] I fled to Vancouver Island to work on my second novel. There I was wooed away by Roderick Haig-Brown, the naturalist, to attend and support a Public Hearing being held in nearby Courtenay to consider the objections to the provincial government's plans to dam and log the shores of Buttle, the Island's last glacier-fed lake. The conservationists lost, as always in B.C., but the experience of participation in an ancient quasi-legal folk-meet gave me the idea and the form for a play whose theme would be the possible damnation of the world's entire environment. (xi)

The "second novel" that Birney was working on at this time was Down the Long Table, a book that would recreate and represent his socialist activism of the thirties. It seems fair to assume that his political experiences of the

depression could not have been too removed from his critical consciousness at this time. The searching and synthesizing process he was undergoing in order to come to terms with his political activism does not result in the rejection or evasion of socialist principles in "Trial of a City" (any more than it does in the novel he eventually published in 1955). Somewhat paradoxically, the inherently flawed process of a public hearing, without sworn witnesses and formal cross-examinations that may have supported a materialist analysis of the political and economic system underlying this environmental exploitation, provided Birney with the flexible, yet complex form he needed to express his political vision in the poem. The malleable, open form of a public hearing, in "Trial of a City," allows Birney to mediate dramatically the conflicting discourses of class, race, economics, politics and religion--allowing for a comprehensive evaluation in the form of a dramatic conflict among competing ways of articulating these issues. Birney conducts his systematic inquiry into Vancouver's "Damning" by structuring various debates and confrontations that deal with the proposed destruction of the city at this stage of its "progress." A close analysis of the ideological and discursive complexity of some of these dialogues indicates the continuing influence of socialism on Birney's poetry.

The "Minister of History" tells us at the outset that this hearing is a public discourse and will be aimed at

Vancouver's social planning and reconstruction, not the individual, private interests of those present: "This Hearing is to consider objections to the plan, not to the planners. The Future has the right, you know, to damn" (Words on Waves 234). P.S. Legion, whose name appropriately satirizes Vancouver's collective pride in its mercantile and industrial "success," defends the city's progressive, technological achievements. Gabriel Powers, Q.C., serves as cross-examiner from the "Office of the Future" and shapes his arguments to "damn most god-naturely Vancouver" (232). The first historical figure called up by the "Minister of History" is Captain George Vancouver. He contrasts the raw landscape he encountered in the eighteenth century with the city's present condition. Captain Vancouver rearticulates Birney's opposition to an uncritical "philosophy of progress," in the spirit of Trotsky's respect for cultural traditions that we encountered in the poetry of his earlier volumes, and links this criticism to the devastation of nature he now sees around him:

Old Burrard doubtless swells to know his harbour
Is toothed with spars and docks from lar--to star
--board.
But all the town, those gross mechanic jaws
That clamp and champ around your port-- (237)

Vancouver's "progress" and speedy expansion have ironically made it an industrial centre without any sense of history. This becomes part of Captain Vancouver's argument to deflate Legion's civic pride. His position rests on the assertion

that Vancouver's achievements may very well amount to superfluous, urban sprawl; the city has been content to develop unevenly and unplanned under the influence of capitalism's laissez-faire economics, even when compared with eighteenth-century London:

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.
Your city, sir--I can't think why I'd need her.
(239)

When the Salish Chief is materialized next, Birney develops a complex critique of Canada's treatment of its indigenous peoples (a critique we encountered in "Montreal") and of the present culture of Vancouver, a culture which can never measure up to the harmony and integrity of the native culture it disrupted and displaced. The Chief decries Vancouver's mastery over nature, its lack of communal life and the subsequent anxiety felt by the city's inhabitants:

Where once we hunted, white men have built many
longhouses,
but they are uneasy as mice within them.
They have made slaves of waterfalls
and magic from the invisible dust of rocks
and are stronger than grizzlies--
but their slaves bully them,
and they are chickadees in council. (241)

Birney positions modern civilization's urban malaise, political repression and domination of nature alongside the natural, collective impulses, self-sufficiency and interdependence of the Chief's people. The contrasting

values of native people are not unrelated to those of the "classless," "truly human" society espoused by Trotsky's revolutionary international socialism:

There was something, I do not know,
 a way of life that died for yours to live.
 We gambled like fool-hens but we did not steal.
 My father spoke to the people always what was true.
 When there was quarrel, he made us speak it out in reason,
 or wrestle weaponless on the clean sand.
 We kept no men as warriors, we held no state on others.
 Each in his village had his work, and all made certain all were fed. (244)

Birney recuperates many elements of "indigenous socialism" with the Chief's description of Salish society. Without any army, "state," or money, the Salish had no wars, political ideologies or economic problems. Their social structure was characterized by universal employment, equitable distribution of wealth, and dispute settlements governed by reason.

Birney employs a poetic technique to accentuate, even further, the distinctions between the world-views of Legion and the Salish Chief and indicates clearly where his ideological sympathies lie. Legion's discourse is expressed through petulant, reactive rhyming couplets that fail to engage critically with any of the rational prose that affirms the more serious quality of the Chief's message. Birney is not setting up a simplistic, satiric inversion (rational, persuasive savage versus irrational, unreflecting

modern) merely to present the Indian culture as superior to that of the white man. What is more plausible, here, when considering the continued intensity of Birney's socialist commitment, is that he surely recognized how inextricably linked both socialist and Indian cultures were, given that their respective value systems are based on a strong communal existence, continuing interdependence with nature and shared social assumptions.

Birney's socialist critique of our culture and society does not rest solely on the rational discourse of the Salish Chief. After addressing the issues of capitalist greed and American profiteering during the gold rush in the dialogue between Gassy Jack Deighton and Legion (252-58), Birney intensifies and deepens this analysis of capitalism with the introduction of Long Will of Langland as the next witness for the prosecution. Langland's critique begins powerfully with a class-based analysis of Vancouver's capitalist system:

Then I saw hurrying a horde from this honeycomb,
clever carls and feckless, men fair and swart,
millhands and waitresses out to work and wonder,
bakers, butchers, and brewsters many,
and veterans of vain wars or wars soon to be.
I saw them tramp hard streets straight as their
faces,
huddle into busses and hurry down to jail. . . .

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

Yea, then I moved west to my hill's margin
 and saw a soft middleclass swaddled in trees,
 in unfrequented churches and fears not a few.
 Chained as fast to profits as poorer folk to
 wages . . . (259, 260, 261)

Birney uses the traditional Marxist concept of alienation, in these lines, to animate Langland's radical critique. In capitalist societies, workers sell their labour and become commodities or things, rather than full social beings. They are alienated from their own work and the communal interest of their culture and society. Birney aims Langland's criticism straight at the liberal, individualist values that, in an unregulated laissez-faire economy, can lead to a morality based on greed and selfishness, rather than on conservative ideals of communal good: "Yet many learned only with machines to mesh themselves, / more to win for the self than to work for the world's good"(260). When Legion states, "our workers aren't dejected" (261), Birney is indicating ironically the very essence of the working class's alienation: it lives with a false consciousness, and its material conditions, the class's relationships to the means of production, prevent it from recognizing its social condition.

Through Langland, Birney's analysis of capitalism achieves even further complexity. By adhering steadfastly to the original Christian spirit of Langland's medieval critique in Piers Plowman, Birney is allowed to offer an essentially Marxist critique from a radical conservative

perspective. Birney positions Langland's critique to establish that true, principled Christianity is closer to socialism than the capitalism it has been reshaped and distorted to serve. After Langland's intimidating analysis, Legion responds defensively:

Mr. Minister, to listen to this witness
I challenge the wisdom--
He's attacking Christianity and
The whole profit system.

A few lines later, Birney underscores the irony by having Legion blurt out: "he's talking like a red--at a Public Hearing" (261).

After Langland's incisive political and economic analysis, the hearing in "Trial of a City" concludes with the unexpected appearance of a live human being, "Mrs Anyone," a Vancouver housewife. As a product of the historical, political and economic realities that have been discussed throughout the verse-drama, she is used by Birney as the final, living judge in this imaginary indictment of Vancouver and our civilization. She quickly sifts through all the devastating evidence and constructs a rational, yet flexible, vision of life and hope out of the conflicting ideological testimonies:

I am the cool Vancouver's kin, not yours
And fosterdaughter to that Headman mild;
In the professor's logic I am woven,
By the rank sailor's flesh my mind is cloven
And I am yet the priestly plowman's child.
For all mankind is matted so within me
Despair can find no earthroom tall to grow;
My veins run warm however veers time's weather;
I breathe Perhaps and May and never No. (267)

Voicing the concluding intensity and focus of Birney's collective vision in "Trial of a City," Mrs. Anyone is the embodiment of the socialist humanist alternative that Langland's pessimism failed fully to appreciate:

His eyes were on the sins he loved to hate.
 He heard the bomb but not the children whistling.
 Yet children grown may sing a doom awry.
 He did not stay to see the selfless deeds that multiply
 And wander like simmering bees across my city's gardens,
 Storing for winter all that summer pardons (271).

In the companion poems of this volume, the residual effect of Birney's socialist experience is also in evidence. The issue of bureaucratic and ideological control that we witnessed in Stalinist concepts like "Proletkult" resurfaced in the form of Canada's reactionary censorship policies towards "foreign" books of literature. Birney considers this cultural restraint in "The Monarch of the ID." Books that did not satisfy the requirements of puritan morality and conservative ideology were stopped at the Canadian border by "The Examiner of Books, / Whose might is right by the Customs Act" (TOAC 58). The arbitrary authority of the state, effected through policies established by a dictatorial bureaucracy, is of a kind with state censorship in Stalin's Russia:

Whether masking as a classic or a book of rhyme or reason
 Or a portrait of a lady who has not enough to please on,
 He will stop them at the border and declare them out of season . . .

Although all things immoral he can cipher at a glance
and singlehanded keeps us clothed in literary pants.
(TOAC 58,59)

Birney recognized that, for Canada to evolve into a truly human, socialist culture, freedom of the press was of ultimate importance. Only with a free, unproscribed press and literature could Canada grow, mature and gradually conquer the negative elements of bourgeois culture.

In "Restricted Area," Birney approaches racism from a satirical perspective that nonetheless delivers a stern warning about Canada's attitude towards Jews:

Stranger be warned, our land is queer
where Nature smiles the most, have fear
You may be just the one in thirty
with whom the whitest beach plays dirty (TOAC 60)

Birney remains ever-vigilant to the continuing threat of racism he saw in Canada at this time because he knows fully well, from his political and military experience, that a racist doctrine has been central to totalitarian states throughout history. In his first volume of poetry Birney pointed to German racism in such poems as "Hands," "On Going to the Wars" and "Status Quo"; a decade later, in his fourth volume, the commitment to social equality and justice persists as he calls attention to Canadian apathy in the face of racial discrimination:

Some tint of skin or name or clothes
can set the roof of suburbs leaking
bands discording, golfers shrieking
Please understand it isn't mine
but Nature's whim to keep them lonely
All I can do is tack this sign
FOR GENTILES ONLY (TOAC 60)

Conclusion

The argument in this reappraisal of Birney's four initial volumes of poetry has confirmed that the continuing presence of his socialist experience in the thirties informs these poems. Our appreciation of the poetry in these collections can only benefit from any reassessment that encourages critical appreciation of the pervasive influence of Marxism and Trotskyism on Birney's aesthetics. Socialist structures of feeling and thinking condition Birney's treatment of conventional poetic themes such as nature, war and love throughout these volumes. More specifically, with Marxist class and political analysis at the very root of his socialist vision, Birney conducts a materialist, systemic inquiry into the underlying conditions of failure in our civilization--conditions such as imperialism, capitalism and racism that are endemic to our society and will forever lead to global wars, the briefest periods of peace, periodic depressions, environmental atrocities and the continuing cultural and economic disparagement of our native peoples.

One could write at length about the cultural and political issues addressed in the early poems of Earle Birney. That these issues are inextricably related, yet not subservient to each other, is a fundamental argument that runs throughout Birney's initial verse. Trotsky's steadfast opposition to Proletkult's prescriptive ideas about creative-writing animates Birney's flexible approach to his

political affiliation and aesthetic orientation. In an article entitled "The Writer and the H-Bomb," written three years after his four initial collections of poetry in 1955, Birney commented directly on the complex nature of political commitment that must, nonetheless, be allowed to influence a writer's work:

If he [the writer] decides to keep his politics out of his art, or to have no politics (in the sense that, say, Kafka had none and wrote only in prayer), he's gambling on other people seeing to it that a sufficient civilization is kept going to provide an audience of at least one for his art. . . . On the other hand, if the writer puts his politics in, he runs the risk of backing the wrong horse, as Stephen Spender did when, in the Thirties, he praised Stalinist communism as the logical step forward from liberalism, and wrote greatly admired lyrics, most of which are already deadlier than the Old Bolsheviks.
(39)

Birney's poems clearly confirm that his politics were allowed to enter his writing in order to criticize and rebuild the economic and political structures of our civilization in terms of a socialist creed rather than sectarian dogma.

A review of the critical responses that have ignored or dismissed the political dimension of Birney's poems for almost five decades has identified the assumptions in methodology and terminology that contribute to the inaccurate representation of his achievement. When a very recent critic, such as Ian Adam, in an article entitled "Marginality and Commitment: Earle Birney's Poetry Seen

through Down the Long Table," can state that Birney's poetry up to the mid-1950s represents a "strategy of struggle, in which the poet from the linguistic margin establishes his local voice through the absorption of a variety of literary idioms" (77), without referring to the socialist vision informing both the novel and the poems, it would appear that little critical progress has been made from the first reviews of Brown and Frye. One must move beyond such theoretical abstractions and examine Birney's socialist affiliation of the thirties, an affiliation that provides a richer, more accurate and concrete account of the "struggle" in these poems.

Trotskyism has been shown to be a particular set of political and aesthetic values that inform Birney's critical and creative writing. These values produced a poetry for Birney that comprehends the important role of proletarian consciousness, political and aesthetic, in the revolutionary transformation of culture and society. Birney treated diverse themes like nature, war and love always within a socially determined context, and when this necessitated a radical social critique of the structures and processes of our civilization, he never hesitated. One of the significant features, then, of Birney's early poetry is the close tie it has to Marxist analysis, which is the basis for the poem's radical criticism of bourgeois society and its systems of exploitation and inequality. Here, in these

poems, as elsewhere throughout his years of creative-writing, Birney confronted the material basis of our civilization's failures and refused to look away.

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