

POET WITHOUT A MUSE

Milton Wilson

YOU MIGHT SUPPOSE that Earle Birney was too busy creating new poems to worry about collecting old ones. But for a writer whose old poems never stop pestering him to be transformed into new ones, the first task is hard to separate from the second. These *Selected Poems 1940-1966* aren't really a retrospective show; they challenge us to see Birney not so much plain as anew. I've read his work far too often in the past to make a fresh look very easy. What follows is at best a series of notes towards an unwritten revised portrait.

1

THE MORE BIRNEY you read, the less he looks like anybody else. His asymmetrical, bulky, unpredictable accumulation of poems gathers individuality as it grows. In context even the least distinguished members start to seem unlikely and even independent. For a poet so unmistakably of his own time and place, he is a surprisingly free agent. Certainly no influential contemporary has ever taught him how to iron out any local idiosyncrasies and unfashionable commonplaces that he preferred to keep. He has learned only what he wanted and at his own speed. Any inescapable influence of his generation that he found irrelevant (T. S. Eliot, for example), he has managed to escape completely. What gives his work distinctiveness, I suppose, is not so much its originality as its mixture of openness and stubbornness, of cleverness and provinciality, even the way it sometimes stumbles over its own reality, like that half-teachable bear the title of whose poem Birney sets at the entrance to this selection.

2

IF THE PROBLEM OF BIRNEY'S EDUCATION as a poet is worth a second glance, it ought to be a very careful and sceptical one, particularly now

that we have these *Selected Poems*, which throw doubt on many of the old Birney legends. Take the matter of chronology. The legend of Birney the late starter may have to give way to Birney the late publisher, depending on how seriously you take the vital statistics of date and place with which he has labelled his offspring, some of them — like “North of Superior” (labelled “1926-1945”) and “Mammorial Stunzas for Aimee Simple McFarcin” (labelled “Toronto 1932-San Francisco 1934,” but first printed in a *Prism* of 1959) — apparently twice-born or at least held in suspension for a long time. Did Birney draft a full-scale version of “North of Superior” in 1926 or did the 1945 version just incorporate a jotted image or two from the distant past? Was “Mammorial Stunzas”, which seems so characteristic of Birney’s linguistic high spirits in the fifties, entirely conceived in the early thirties or did the young Birney merely give Aimee her graffiti from Belshazzar’s feast and a pun or two on her name and then wait twenty-five years for the right poem to go with them and justify publication? The dating, in this case, seems to insist on a finished product in 1934 (or as finished as a Birney poem ever allows itself to be — the format has been completely reshaped for 1966). At least I will now stop being puzzled as to why anyone would choose to write Aimee’s definitive poem long after everyone else had forgotten her.

Then there’s the legend of a poetic hiatus in the mid-fifties, of a Birney unproductive because he had maybe lost faith in poetry or humanity or even himself. But, from the new vantage point, any hiatus, if it existed, starts to look pretty small, the sort of thing that needed little more than a trip to Mexico for its cure. And anyway, if Birney can write and only publish twenty or twenty-five years later, who knows what piles of unpublished poems lie in his bottom drawer waiting for their public moment?

3

SIMPLE QUESTIONS OF CHRONOLOGY may be tricky, but the difficulties are multiplied for anyone who ventures to talk about Birney’s poetic development and its relation to his poetic contemporaries. Most of the obvious half-truths that used to occur to me, I now find myself wanting to qualify almost as soon as I have uttered them. The staple product of conventional up-to-date British and American poetry can (very broadly indeed) be described as having moved from a metaphoric and allusive phase in the thirties and forties to a more linguistic — idiomatic and syntactic — one in the fifties and sixties, from the rhetoric of the image to the rhetoric of the voice. It’s tempting to see Birney’s own development following a similar course, with *Trial of a City* (1952) as the Janus-faced turning

point. Nobody could be surprised at the date of an elaborate editorial conceit like “Page of Gaspé” (1943-1950) or an even more elaborate tidal one like “The Ebb Begins from Dream” (1945-1947) — despite Birney’s difficulty persuading editors to print the latter. Still, although they date, they aren’t just dated. The slightly later “North Star West” (1951) seems more of a mere period piece, the sort of inventive and readable exercise in imagery that with luck you might be able to bring off in those days. Indeed, if I interpret a remark in Birney’s Preface correctly, that may be part of the point of the poem. But, while some of Birney’s poems could (and in fact did) fit quite snugly into the post-war world of *Penguin New Writing*, the philologist and verbal mimic didn’t need to wait until *Trial of a City* to be released. Among the early poems for which obviously no retrospective indulgence at all is needed are “Anglo-Saxon Street”, “Mappe-mounde” and “War Winters”. Birney is amused by those critics who thought that to write the verse of these poems he had to be an imitator of Hopkins, instead of just a mere student and teacher of mediaeval literature. Although he is properly aware of the dangers in any academic-poetic alliance, his own academic niche could hardly have been a luckier choice.

4

BIRNEY’S VOCAL VIRTUOSITY hasn’t seemed out of place in the more recent worlds of “articulate energy” and “projective verse”, or on the p.a. circuit. But he can’t be confused with the new virtuosos of breath and syntax, and his academic context certainly predates structural linguistics. There’s also something a bit old-fashioned about his taste for “phonetic” spelling; it doesn’t help much for Birney to write “damnear” or “billyuns,” when nobody says “damn near” or “billions” anyway. I suppose that it all justifies itself, in that without it the “Billboards” and “Diaper” poems couldn’t have been written at all, but they remind me a bit of the easy old days when all a writer had to do to present his readers with a recognizable substandard dialect was to spell their own standard dialect as they really pronounced it. Birney’s phonetic technique works best with an exotic like the speaker in that delightful monologue “Sinaloa”. The people who strike my ear most successfully, however, receive no such phonetic help, like the two-tongued Colombian bookseller in “Cartagena de Indias”, which (if I had to make a choice) I would call his finest poem.

BIRNEY'S OTHER NOTATIONAL IDIOSYCRASIES interest me far more than his spelling. Except for a few poems (notably "David", "The Damnation of Vancouver" and the translations) and a few special places within poems (mainly conversations), instead of using the conventional comma, semicolon, colon and period as rhetorical and syntactic signposts, he now relies mainly on spacing and lineation, and has revised his old poems accordingly.

He is not (so the Preface tells us) trying to facilitate immediate and accurate reading or comprehension by these changes; on the contrary, his aim is "the art of indefinitely delayed communication — Infinite Ambiguity." I don't know how seriously to take these last phrases; I do know that the new ambiguity is real enough, and in a few cases results in a new awkwardness. The chief problem is at the end of a line, where the distinction between endstopped and run-on lines is no longer visible, even when still relevant. One space starts to look like any other space, whether it breaks or ends a line. In "Captain Cook" when

flashed him a South Sea shilling; like a javelin
it split the old shop's air.

is revised to

flashed him a South Sea shilling like a javelin
it split the old shop's air

the phrase at the end of the first line can now look backwards and forwards instead of just forwards. It wouldn't be hard to defend the ambiguity of *that* revised version. But in the same poem when

First voyage, mouths burning
from the weevils in the biscuits,
charted New Zealand.

is revised to

First voyage mouths burning
from the weevils in the biscuits
charted New Zealand

the new syntactic ambiguity of the second line is a doubtful blessing indeed. It may be amusing, but the joke is at the expense of the poem.

The advantages and disadvantages of the new notation are worth weighing not just from passage to passage but from poem to poem. One fine poem that I much prefer to see in its old format is "Wake Island": the format in the *Selected Poems* seems more confusing than ambiguous. On the other hand, while

not a word of “Late Afternoon in Manzanilla” has been altered, the poem looks twice as good and comes off twice as well in its new format. I had no idea until now what an excellent poem it is.

Of course, the reaction against the clutter of punctuation in favour of the austerity of space Birney shares with a good many of his newer contemporaries. But he isn’t always that austere (dashes, apostrophes, question marks, etc. are used), or, for that matter, consistent. In the new space-filled pages, even a few concluding periods still survive (I’m glad that he kept the one at the end of the “Diaper” poem), although, so far as I’ve noticed, only one anomalous comma (near the end of “Tavern by the Hellespont”):

Between
the individual tables couples uncoupled
by the radio’s decision, turn to their true oneness —

and here, although I like to think that it’s an unexpected attempt to limit Infinite Ambiguity, it may be just an editorial or proofreading oversight, like the mislineation that disfigures “The Damnation of Vancouver” on page 176.

6

NOT THAT BIRNEY minds anomalies anyway. Some of his best poems are sports. No one could possibly anticipate them, he has shown no desire to repeat them, but once written they are an inevitable choice for his *Selected Poems*, no matter how stringent the selection. “St Valentine Is Past” is an obvious example. One of the few Birney poems that reads like a pure gift from his muse (he is not the sort of poet whom one usually credits with a muse), it has remained virtually unchanged since appearing in 1952’s *Trial of a City and Other Verse*. In these ballad quatrains, while Theseus is off on his boar-hunt, and death seems mercifully at a distance, love finds late fulfilment under a shadowless sky. The lovers, like the age-old elements of earth and water, renew their long-past youthful fertility, and, for a day at least, seem to have Time on their side.

While he is rooted rock she strikes
to foam a loud cascade
that drowns the jeering gullish wings
far crashings in the glade

No more while lizard minutes sleep
around a cactus land

they'll blow their longings out like spores
that never grass the sand

No longer Time's a cloud of cliffs
unechoed by her Nile . . .

But these elemental lovers or late-coupling birds or aging Venus and Adonis (or whatever you wish to call them) are no match for dusty Time. And, as their elegiac, unkept sounds fade away, the pastness of St. Valentine's Day is sealed by the return of hunter, boar and pack.

And yet and yet a failing rod
strikes only dust from rock
while all the tune and time they breathe
is never kept in talk

Now water sky and rock are gone
the huddled woodbirds back
and hot upon the throbbing boar
comes Theseus and his pack

Although Birney, in his primitive or mediaeval or modern vein (sometimes all at once), is often a poet of myths, as such different poems as "Mappemounde", "Pachuchan Miners", "Takkakaw Falls", "Bushed", "Ballad of Mr Chubb" and, of course, "November Walk near False Creek Mouth" (with its updated characters from the sagas) make evident, nevertheless the sort of Renaissance myth-making that "St. Valentine is Past" does superbly seems to me totally uncharacteristic of him. If I had to choose a historical niche for him other than his own, the Age of Spenser would be my last choice.

And yet, in other respects, this is a typical Birney love poem, typical at least of his published range. In a recent article on Irving Layton, George Woodcock has praised our older love poets at the expense of their younger rivals. But Birney's love poems have been elegiac and autumnal from the start, or, when not elegiac, at least about love at a distance (e.g., "This Page My Pigeon" and, in a sense, "The Road to Nijmegen"). The very lovely "Under the Hazel Bough" (stylistically another anomaly, but quite different from "St. Valentine is Past") is destined to this end:

but no man sees
where the trout lie now
or what leans out
from the hazel bough

In some recent poems the autumnal erotic note takes on a January-and-May form. I'm thinking not just of "Haiku for a Young Waitress", "Curacao" and "Twenty-third Flight", but also of "On the Beach" (which I miss from these *Selected Poems*), where the no longer agile speaker cries:

I will follow in a small trot only
not whirling
O girl from the seafoam
have pity

and even of "A Walk in Kyoto", where sex somehow triumphs over "the ancient discretions of Zen".

7

PERHAPS ALL THAT I HAVE just been doing is applying to his love poems the cliché that Birney is in some respects a very Chaucerian kind of poet. The cliché deserves its wider application too. To begin with, there is his basic impersonality. You can learn practically nothing about him as a private person from his published poems. Self-revelation or self-analysis is not his business. And yet, like Chaucer, and increasingly with age, he enjoys offering us a kind of persona in the foreground: the innocent scapegoat of "Meeting of Strangers", the aging and garlanded ram of "Twenty-third Flight", the absurdly grateful initiate of "Cartagena de Indias". If one of these days somebody writes a Ph.D. thesis called *Birney's Irony*, one person on whom the irony will not be lost is Birney himself.