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"To Make a Show of Concealing": The Revision of Satire in Earle Birney's "Bushed"

Duncan McFarlane

Along with "David" and "The Damnation of Vancouver," "Bushed" stands at the head of Earle Birney's body of poetic work: in popular fame and literary craft, earnestly revered "with a rather schoolboyish veneration" (Purdy 75) by critics and poets alike. The poem also marks a turning point in Birney's career. It came just after the completion of his first novel, *Turvey*, appearing in the collection *Trial of a City and Other Verse* (1952), of which Northrop Frye says "that for virtuosity of language there has never been anything like it in Canadian poetry" (*Bush* 16), and in which A.J.M. Smith observes "a distinct advance on the simple and unified narrative 'David'" (12). Yet to look solely at the finished poem is, in this case, to understand a fraction of its total significance. In the process of drafting and revising "Bushed," Birney transformed the poem from forthright satire into something else entirely. From its first draft — which has never before been analyzed — to its final version, "Bushed" moves between the two extremes that Frye nominates as central themes in Canadian poetry, "one a primarily comic theme of satire and exuberance, the other a primarily tragic theme of loneliness and terror" (*Bush* 168). The published "Bushed" has more in common with *Macbeth* than with *MacFlecknoe*, or with satire at all. The revisionary energies at work in Birney's creative process are driven by an aesthetic bias expressed most clearly in his criticism on Chaucer, through which he expounds a remarkable and condemnatory view of satire as the adolescence of irony.

Less than two years after *Turvey* was published,[1] Earle Birney began work on "Bushed," a poem with which he struggled. Birney has earned a reputation as "a frequent reviser" of his own work (Stouck 108) who made revision not merely a step in the process of composition but "followed a lifelong practice of revising" his poems (MacDonald 120). Nor did publication render the final word: more than ninety per cent of

the poems in his *Selected Poems* were revised in one way or another from their prior published versions (Woodcock, "Turning" 166; Carruth 62-63). The problematic development of "Bushed" in particular has been discussed briefly by two prior critics: Richard Robillard, in his companion volume for McClelland and Stewart's New Canadian Library in 1971 (42-45), and Laurence Steven, in his short article for *Canadian Poetry* in 1981 (1-2). Robillard is concerned with Birney's poetic career in general, and argues that the revisions made to "Bushed" mirror a larger movement away from the satiric and satirical (among other things). Steven agrees with this analysis, but takes it further: "While what Robillard says is true on the general level, he fails to take into account the fact that a very similar movement [away from satire] takes place in Birney's creative process itself" (2). This is an insight of enormous importance in studying Birney: that the pattern of his finished work reflects, on a larger scale, the nature of his creative process, which consists in a maturation away from the satiric.

However, the sole source on which both critics base their studies is Birney's own account of his revisions to "Bushed" in *The Creative Writer*, which first aired on CBC Radio in 1965 and was subsequently published under that title as a series of essays in 1966. Birney's annotated typescript drafts of "Bushed" were made publicly available that very year,[2] when he transferred his papers from the University of British Columbia Library to the Rare Books Room (now the Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library) at the University of Toronto to coincide with his writer-in-residence appointment; this collection was accessioned the same year by the reference librarians in Toronto (Barr 43-44).[3] Although the Finding Aid for the Birney Collection gives a first accession of 1976 (1), Barr's 1987 *Guide* makes it clear that this was in fact the third accession since 1966 (44). While both Robillard's and Steven's studies predate the comprehensive Finding Aid in 1983 (Shoesmith), both scholars could have made use of Birney's drafts of "Bushed" but neglected them entirely. It must be admitted that neither Steven nor Robillard discuss the drafting of "Bushed" in great detail. Steven's article concentrates largely on two other poems, "Transcontinental" and "Man Is A Snow," using Birney's descriptions of revising "Bushed" by way of introduction. Robillard, who would have had less ready access to these archival materials in 1971, had, unfortunately, both more occasion and greater cause to do so, with a mandate from McClelland and Stewart (who

also published *Trial of a City*) to discuss Birney's work at large, and the time and space to consider Birney's papers in his survey. In neither case was this most important resource consulted, or even acknowledged; both prior studies of the revisions to "Bushed" rely exclusively on *The Creative Writer*.

Apart from the insurmountable problems inherent in taking a poet's account of his own work at face value, Birney's published account of his first draft of "Bushed" — "So I began the poem" — is limited to a recollection of the first two lines that *does not in fact agree* with the first draft in his manuscripts (*Creative* 29; cf. Draft 1).[4] Birney claims to have written "Shouting unspectacled out of the steam," but the second line of the first draft manuscript originally read something else, most of which Birney deleted using multiple passes of x's and z's to almost completely obscure the underlying characters.[5] Just the first three words of this original second line survive intact; Birney added a line of type just above the deleted segment, so that the line reads, "You ask me, peering unspectacled out of the steam" (Draft 1). The poet later crossed out the first four of those words with pen and replaced them with "shouting," at which point the line reads as it finally does in *The Creative Writer*. Birney also states that he "soon scrapped that" draft (*Creative* 29), yet the archived first draft is in fact longer than the finished poem and heavily revised. He goes on to quote from a "second attempt" at the poem involving a dialogue in "three voices" ("Creative"; cf. *Creative* 29-30), which does not appear in the Thomas Fisher collection of his papers. The first three drafts in the collection are numbered sequentially in pen by Birney; the draft labeled "2" is titled "The light" and begins, "When the lightning struck the rainbow of his life," with no dialogue whatever (Draft 2). This phantom dialogue draft is doubly mysterious because the eight drafts on file are one less than the "nine drafts" Birney claims to have written (*Creative* 31).

Although the original cataloguers of the Earle Birney Collection have since retired from the Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library, the current librarians affirm that it is "*extremely* impossible that they or anyone since has lost pages or miscegenated [sic] the manuscripts" (Reid; Shoesmith). The reasons for this inconsistency between Birney's account and his own manuscripts may never be known, but the fact of it should not be overlooked. The author is equally unreliable (factually speaking) on other aspects of the draft manuscripts: he claims to have taken

five weeks and seven drafts to identify "Old Sam" and his cabin as the objects of the poem (*Creative* 30), yet the *second* draft in the archives, and every one after it, have the same unnamed "he" standing in for "Old Sam" as the final version, and the same figurations of the mountain peak as an arrowhead aimed at the man's heart, and the barring of the cabin door. Birney's account of the poem's composition, while certainly useful for supplementary illustration of his own thoughts and feelings toward his work, cannot be relied upon for direct evidence in a serious critical study, and could be seen as effectively prejudicial to any understanding of Birney's creative process. Moreover, neither Robillard nor Steven appears to have listened to the archival recordings of the original CBC broadcasts, removing a further source of aesthetic information — the author's illustrative use of voice — which is not necessarily prejudicial, but is actually complementary to the drafts, and which, as I will show, is important to a complete understanding of Birney's creative process in revising "Bushed."

There is a great deal of open critical ground here, unbroken and unsurveyed. Yet satire is always uncertain territory for criticism. There is little consensus on any aspect of satire: whether it constitutes a genre, form, or mode; whether it is a political, sociological, psychological, or even (some few suggest) a literary phenomenon; whether it is definable at all or entirely protean. Birney may have declared his first draft unequivocally "a satire" (*Creative* 29-33), he may in fact have considered himself a satirist,[6] and he may well have been described as one by critics from Malcolm Lowry to A.J.M. Smith to D.J. Dooley, in relation to both his poetry and his prose fiction, but that is still not enough to proceed definitively. What is needed here and now is a relevant provisional definition to get the operation under way; thankfully, we are supplied with two — both Canadian.

Between Northrop Frye's provision of satire as "militant irony" (*Anatomy* 223) and Birney's own critical conception of irony as "indirect satire" (*Essays* 21), we may appear to be hung up in agreeable tautology, but the critical advantages are absolute. Both agree that satire is akin to irony. Both agree that satire is characterized by a definite direction: it is transitive, taking an object and setting to work on it.[7] And both agree — to an extent that will become more apparent and important as this essay progresses — to the common bias that satire is the lesser

or more limited art.[8] There is even a critical moment in which Birney characterizes satire in Frye's military terms: "For a medieval reader, the inverted gusto of the Monk's portrait would but faintly camouflage a machine-gun nest of satiric assault upon everything that was decadent in fourteenth-century monasticism" (*Essays* 10-11). Although Frye and Birney were contemporaries at the University of Toronto, and shared an enthusiasm for Chaucerian ironies, I do not contend that they had any substantial theoretical accord: nowhere in Elspeth Cameron's expansive biography, *Earle Birney: A Life*, does she present them as anything more than friendly departmental acquaintances who occasionally reviewed one another's work (205, 336). All I propose is that their conceptions of satire are in sufficient agreement to allow for a discussion of the first draft of "Bushed" as satire — that Frye's thought may substantiate Birney's without any risk of confounding the two.

Birney's first draft of the poem sets out as satire, but gradually disengages from its ironic target.[9] Its composition originated, he says, with a powerful "satiric contempt" directed at two fellow professors he had overheard in the locker room showers of the pools at the University of British Columbia ("Creative"). At the start of the first draft, these intellectual nabobs are in the midst of discussing how they might retire to the mountains in the event of nuclear war:

> O professor, letting the gym shower fall on the white cocoon of your paunch,
> You ask me, peering unspectacled out of the steam,
> Would the Rockies do? Because they won't waste bombs on the mountains . . .
> Not atom bombs . . .
> Perhaps one should . . . what? — buy a cabin, settle the family now?
> But how does one live? . . . (Draft 1; original ellipses)

The obvious answer to this last question, from a lifelong outdoorsman like Birney, is that they wouldn't live out a month — no matter how well stocked and supplied, whether or not the rest of the world was in flames. It is a pretension of the civilized that civilization is something they can live without: that is Birney's satiric target. The same belief that makes dilettantes feel that they are "roughing it" at their comfortable cottages in the Muskokas is here expanded by satiric fantasy to apocalyptic dimensions, as per Frye (*Anatomy* 224). Their lack of physical fitness is stressed: fat and paunchy, blanched and malnourished, inherently

docile ("letting" the water "fall" rather than washing[10]), going blind and quite possibly diabetic.[11] The professors are in fact barely maintaining their health in a comfortable university setting, complete with gym access, making their pretense of survivalism all the more ridiculous. Their logic is sound, but their underlying presumptions absurd; fission bombs might not be wasted on mountains, but their lives certainly would be. Even more risible is the suggestion that they should "pack off the family now," condemning themselves and their loved ones to a death in the bush without even the reality of nuclear war to force them out of the city. Crucially, in its earliest form, this first draft of "Bushed" is not merely unsympathetic to the professors, but expresses real poetic antipathy. The crossed-out lines about fishing — "the ospreys have been doing it longer" (Draft 1) — casually imply the eventual starvation of the professors and their families, if madness does not finish them first. The poet's initial satiric contempt is so great that even their deaths are mocked. Thus the two preoccupations of this draft — food and death — suggest an implicit imagery of scavenging, the bones of these pretenders to be picked clean by a succession of unspecified creatures. In only a few lines, Birney's satire has been admirably established, and his militant ironies effectively deployed.

The poem soon deviates from this established satire. The poetic voice changes periodically, then completely by the end of the draft — a fact that Birney himself emphasizes in his own reading of the first draft for the CBC, by changing his tone from declamatory to hushed and leaning audibly closer to the microphone for a more intimate effect:

> There's a lake the Stoneys say a rainbow was broken in
> . . . .
> Once as a kid I stroked a porcupine there with my hat
> and had quills to trade for a winter . . .
> . . . .
> Under a mountain so big it slows your mind to look at it.
> Alive, too, the mountain sent rocks whizzing down every hot morning,
> Boomed avalanches at noon, went asleep on its feet at sundown.
> . . . .
> First the alpenglow violent on the aguille,
> Then the darkness smokes out of the valleys til the peak's a flint arrowhead
> Poised at nothing

Til the moon rolls silently up to inspect his battalion of clouds.
(Draft 1)

Apart from the obviously martial language of *Turvey*, which is still on Birney's mind here — the battalion of clouds lined up for inspection by their lunar officer — there is another implicit similarity with Frye's model. When satire recedes, poetic diction creeps forward, along with simple, honest, and sympathetic emotions. The personifications of nature are clearly not the imaginative work of Birney's stodgy fellow professors, but of a mature mind more sensitive to the ironies of nature's inchoate wonders and dangers — as much in touch with the soft alpenglow as the threatening shape of the mountain. Faced with the memory of the lake into which a rainbow broke, the poet remembers a gesture of childhood, a brief, gentle contact with a wild animal that stayed with him — both in the quills that stuck to his hat and the lingering memory he now reflects upon, as Wordsworth did in quiet reflection upon Tintern Abbey.[12] This almost romantic natural poetry stands at odds with the cutting satire of the professors that initiates the poem.

That initial satire was as dissatisfying to Birney as the subsequent images were fascinating; he felt the drafted poem insufficient in almost every way (*Creative* 29-31), and so began his revisions. The state of the first draft reflects this: it is heavily edited, with Birney striking out words and entire lines, crossing others out with pen and pencil, writing others and crossing those out too. One of the deleted segments (the second line of the draft) clearly indicates a stage in which this was conceived not as a discussion between professors, but as a satiric dialogue between the poet and one of them: "~~You ask me, peering~~ unspectacled out of the steam" — something that might have resembled Lucian (cf. *Essays* 29-30). Birney does indeed read from just such a dialogue ("Creative"), though the corresponding draft is, as I have said, nowhere to be found among his manuscripts, and is of dubious authority. This appears to have been the first of many such revisions away from the original plan of the poem. In his segment for the CBC, Birney remarks that after writing the first drafts, he wanted to get at the imagery and emotions that he felt were behind his satiric contempt. He gradually recalled that, as a boy, he and his father had watched a group of men carrying the body of Sam, an old trapper, out of his cabin at the foot of a mountain. When the young Birney asked his father how the man had died, he replied, simply and evocatively, "He was bushed" (*Creative* 31).

The adolescent[13] memory of this man's hard life and horrific death in the bush proves to be the catalyst for Birney's poetic revision: "*Bushed*! That was my title, my theme" (*Creative* 31).

Thus begins each subsequent draft of "Bushed" in the Earle Birney Collection, which are in substance identical to the final published version: not with the professors in the shower, but with the unnamed trapper confronting the wilderness that will consume him. Compare the published beginning with the one from the first draft, and Birney's satiric sublimation is immediately apparent:

> He invented a rainbow but lightning struck it
> shattered it into the lake-lap of a mountain
> so big his mind slowed when he looked at it
> Yet he built a shack on the shore
> learned to roast porcupine belly and
> wore the quills in his hat (*Selected* 117)

The satire is simply gone. In its place, the latent poetic imagery in the first draft has been moved up and transferred to the sympathetic figure of the trapper, who has displaced the antipathetic professors. The rainbow broken in the lake becomes *his* illusory invention; it is his mind that slows in the shadow of the mountain, his the hat that holds the quills, he who roasts the porcupine, and he who builds a sturdy shack on the shore in spite of his awe. The irony here lies in the sublime disparity between the small competencies of this single man and the enormity of the nature he confronts; there is no militancy to it, no malice, and nothing that might be ridiculed by Birney. The trapper here becomes the focus of the poem.

The poet's sympathy is paramount, and the reader's is clearly sought; Birney's commentary seeks to draw attention to both emotional states (*Creative* 30-33). The subject attempts to confront nature on genial terms, first going out each dawn, and then only later and later in the day, until he is so terrified that he has to wait until nightfall. Soon even that is too much:

> And now he could only
> bar himself in and wait
> for the great flint to come singing into his heart (*Selected* 117)

The fear of dying — metaphorically or literally — in cold, solitary madness is one of the hallmarks of Canadian literature; indeed, it is the singular expression of the conclusive principle of Frye's *Bush Garden* essays, the "garrison mentality" (225-27). Magdalene Redekop observes in *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature* that "Bushed" "reads like a gloss on Frye's vision of a landscape of horror," citing it as a seminal example of Canadian confrontational nature poetry (271-72). Yet this is something of a break from Frye, who considers the garrison mentality produced by such isolation as a starting point for a peculiarly Canadian brand of satire (*Bush* 229, 233, 239). The difference lies in the implicit plurality of Frye's concept and the explicit singularity of Birney's poetic protagonist. Even Frye's most desperate garrison contains a small community, but Birney's trapper chooses to confront the wilderness on his own. A garrison of one cannot hold out long when "confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing and formidable physical setting" (*Bush* 227). The reality of nature's violence overwhelms Birney's original satire: no trace remains in the final draft, in which the entire poem has been refocused on a sympathetic protagonist who was only faintly implicit in the first draft. For Birney, the memory of the death of the isolated trapper is too heavy on his heart for him to continue the satire (*Creative* 29-31; cf. *Anatomy* 224). This pathetic recognition is a crucial understanding to be carried forward from an analysis of the first draft of "Bushed" to its final form.

The opening imagery of the finished poem appears to be in some sense a reflection of Birney's creative process, much as Robillard and Steven describe. The initial thrust of satire is displaced by the old memory of the cabin by the mountain on the lake, an image that slowed Birney's mind from the pique of satire to what he felt was a deeper mode of consideration. Indeed, the only trace of satire remaining in the final poem is a line that appears earliest in the third draft, and which lies oddly on the page: "owls in the bear-dusky wood derided him" — with derision properly understood as one of the chief activities of a satirist. The phrasing and rhythm are peculiar, but the purpose is clear. The owls are figures of menace; along with the moon that carves cryptic, "unknown totems out of the lakeshore," and "the moosehorned cedars trekked from the swamp" like Birnam wood to Dunsinane,[14] they lead the trapper's deteriorating mind to the conclusion that the wind is reshaping

the mountain for a killing blow — the very image which concludes the poem. This Shakespearean allusion suggests the tragic form which the poem ultimately takes and how it relates to its satiric origins, and affords convenient examples for a discussion of the interaction of the satiric and the tragic generally, and specifically in "Bushed."

Birney's owls are satirical characters, insofar as they are sketched as voices of hooting derision, but like Macbeth's young page, their function is tragic. An audience laughs as surely at Macbeth's verbal assault on the boy's "linen cheeks" as at the Inverness Porter's alcoholic hallucinations and equivocations, but each of these two speeches heralds a crucial moment in the tragedy.[15] In both cases, a scene of derision immediately precedes a scene of immense tragic intensity; as Frye remarks, how "easy for the same satiric tone to turn bitter and nightmarish" (*Bush* 170). In "Bushed," the mocking owls introduce the threatening approach of cedars, in turn foreshadowing the tragic climax of the poem. Likewise, Macbeth's page is brutally mocked by the protagonist, but his report, one short scene later, that Birnam wood is on the march, is recognized by Macbeth as one of the Witches' fatal prophecies — the first crucial tragic *anagnorisis* precipitating the climax (cf. *Anatomy* 212). The mechanics are different — Macbeth mocks, Birney's trapper is mocked — but both instances of the satirical have the effect of ironically deepening tragic pathos in counterpoint. While "Bushed" cannot be a tragedy per se, as it is not drama, its final form and effect are those of a tragic poem both for Birney and the reader.

Bearing with this example[16] a moment longer, the nature of Birney's revision of the poem from satiric to tragic is perhaps best expressed in the exchange between Macbeth and the Doctor, which comes, conveniently enough, just before the approach of the woods to which Birney alludes:

> MACBETH. Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd,
>   Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
>   Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
>   And with some sweet oblivious antidote
>   Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
>   Which weighs upon the heart?
> DOCTOR.   Therein the patient
>   Must minister to himself. (5.3.40-46)

What is being debated here is *catharsis*: the purgation or purification of emotions, chiefly pity and fear. Macbeth's conceit, common in Elizabethan tragedy, is medical;[17] Birney uses similar metaphorical language in saying that the poem's drafts were "sweated out of my bowels" (*Creative* 33). While Macbeth equivocates about the exact location of his problem — heart or brain — Birney prefers the predominantly mental, Freudian language of "the awful corridors of the human mind," "my twelve-year old psyche," "suppressed memory," "repressed association," and "schizophrenic moments" (32-33). Laurence Steven rightly seizes on Birney's repeated use of the word "purged" in describing the successful composition of "Bushed" (1-2) but does not isolate catharsis as the mechanism involved.

The process of poetic revision as tragic purgation requires further insight, and Frye is once more instrumental.[18] Understanding that "in catharsis the emotions are purged by being attached to objects" (*Anatomy* 66), Birney's relationship to the various drafts of the poem becomes clear. The first satiric draft raised in Birney some suggestion of what he called "some far deeper emotion . . . flooding in on me" (*Creative* 29). After writing the phantom dialogue draft, Birney attached his emotions tentatively to an object: "The cabin, that was what mysteriously bugged me. Not the unlikely cabin those two profs would have built, but the old one, already deserted, by Mystic Lake thirty-five years ago. . . . Why, why, did I keep remembering that cabin. . . .?" (31). Eventually, Birney identifies the true objects of the poem's cathartic movement: "my poem wasn't really about the professors at all, or about atom-bomb survival, but about a cabin I had never seen, and its inhabitant, whom I had last glimpsed when he was a corpse muffled on a pack-saddle . . . a far deeper more scary vision" (31). The poet wrestled with this "til at last I had given it the words that left me at peace" in the final draft (32), those emotions having been successfully attached to an aesthetic object and purged from his mind. The relief and exhilaration that Birney describes upon completing the poem (31-33) are exactly those predicted by Frye's advanced Aristotelian model: "The traditional theory of catharsis implies that the emotional response to art is not the raising of an actual emotion, but the raising and casting out [i.e., purgation] of actual emotion on the wave of something else. We may call this something else, perhaps, exhilaration or exuberance: the vision of something liberated from experience, the response kindled in

the reader by the transmutation of experience into mimesis, of life into art" (*Anatomy* 93). This consequent exhilaration, Frye notes, applies equally to the audience and the author himself (94); it is not a much greater step to extend the whole underlying process of catharsis to the author, as well, by which the climactic drafting of the poem stands in for the climax of the action on stage — both acts of mimesis. Frye does not specifically address authorial or creative catharsis, but his thought clearly supports such an extension.

The trapper's self-isolation is as surely an expression of tragic *hamartia* as the decision to act on the prophecy of Scottish witches, or to ignore that of Tiresias; it could also be argued that the confrontation of man against nature is as pure an expression of *hybris* as Xerxes in *The Persians*, if nature is broadly understood to include both Aeschylus's attendant Gods and Fates and Birney's animated mountain in the same wide sublime. Indeed, Al Purdy singles out "Bushed" as the poem in Birney's catalogue that exemplifies "Greek tragedy" in its singular possession of "a fateful quality which you can lift like a grid and place on almost any hopeless situation" (75). And because the trapper chooses this fate for himself, his tragic action falls under Aristotle's category of *proairesis*, glossed by Frye as the "free choice of an end" (*Anatomy* 210), the type of heroic action which occasions the highest levels of tragic catharsis. Susan Glickman astutely observes, contra D.G. Jones and many others, that in the poem's final lines we are not in fact told of the trapper's death (138-41)[19] but of its dreadful anticipation: the very definition of *anagnorisis* for Frye, "not simply the knowledge by the hero of what has happened to him . . . but the recognition of the determined shape of the life he has created for himself, with an implicit comparison with the uncreated potential life he has forsaken" (*Anatomy* 212). We are left with two distinct poems corresponding to Frye's two themes: the first, forsaken satiric draft, heavily revised and consigned to the archives, and the final tragic version that was published.

The change in "Bushed" is so oddly complete that it recalls the story of the philosopher's sock: purchased in ecumenical black but prone to growing holes all around, which he dutifully darned with red thread, until, one day, he declared with due reservation that he had a red sock. The effect of nature's violence, red in tooth and claw, overwhelms the original satire, and the poet's revision is total: the entire poem has been

refocused on a sympathetic protagonist who was only faintly implicit in the secondary imagery of the first draft. There is one last question to ask: why should Birney condemn the satiric in preferring the tragic? His preference for the tragic "Bushed" could be easily allowed as a function of its cathartic effect — but why should he not have published two poems, a satiric-tragic diptych united along an axis of shared imagery and situation? The satiric draft is slashed through with typewritten *x*'s, pen, and pencil, betraying the contempt Birney later describes. It is derided as "too flip, too much on the outside" (*Creative* 29). In redrafting, he says, "Here I quit a second time, disgusted. The thing was getting nowhere," and eventually dismisses both the dialogue of the professors and his poetic recreation of it as "vapid talk" (31). To have a preference for tragedy over satire is one thing; to utterly despise one's own satiric poem is quite another. The reasons for Birney's contempt for the first draft of "Bushed" and the impetus behind his revisionary process are most clearly expressed in his criticism on Chaucer, which holds satire to be a limited, juvenile form of a larger ironic art.

A complete survey of Birney's criticism — including an 850-page doctoral thesis called "Chaucer's Irony" — would be prohibitive in a paper of this scope; fortunately, just such a synopsis was produced by Beryl Rowland, herself a Chaucer scholar and the lone PhD candidate Birney sponsored. She provides the tantalizing suggestion that Birney's "approach [to Chaucer] was very much influenced . . . by his own practice of poetry" (Rowland 78). In that potent cross-pollination of criticism and creation, an idea of satire derived from academic work seems likely to have fertilized a germinal satiric poem. Les McLeod describes a strong connection between some of Birney's poetry and his critical work on Chaucer's irony in his 1981 study, but does not consider the role of Birney's criticism in his creative process — only in its results — and does not consider "Bushed" in his survey. McLeod also confines his enquiry to Birney's 1936 doctoral thesis, rather than his more mature critical thought in a series of essays published throughout his career and eventually collected in *Essays on Chaucerian Irony*, which Rowland prefaced. Rowland also points out that, like Birney, Chaucer has been historically overlooked as a satirist. She summarizes Birney's survey of Chaucer's critics, from Dryden[20] on down through G.L. Kittredge, in which the Canterburian is lauded for his poetry and sensibility even as

his satire is dismissed as trivial or condemned as obscene. The similar-
ities between Birney and Chaucer accumulate quietly, and the deepest
connection between the two authors lies tacit in Birney's critical subtext.

Rowland's singular understanding is that in Birney's critical view,
satire is an adolescent state of literature — one that comes before irony.
We are so accustomed to speaking of satire and irony in categorical,
Kantian terms, of irony as *a priori* the condition of the possibility of
satire, that this seems almost impossible. Yet Birney's point is unmistak-
able: in his mind, Chaucer the satirist *becomes* Chaucer the ironist; satire
is, generally speaking, the ground from which well-nourished irony
grows; as irony outgrows its satiric adolescence, it leaves this ground
behind entirely, emerging unsoiled (Rowland 76). Whether or not
Birney's is a defensible theoretical position — it is, at the very least, a
fascinating one — is of no consequence here. This is Birney's concep-
tion, and he in turn conceived and reconceived "Bushed," so it demands
consideration on those grounds.

Early in "Is Chaucer's Irony a Modern Discovery?" — a short but
brilliant survey of criticism from the fifteenth century down — Birney
makes a small, unheralded assertion that almost inverts the idea of sat-
ire itself. It is nothing less than the author's critical formulation of that
same move away from satire that this paper locates in the revisions to
"Bushed." Antique studies on Chaucerian irony, says Birney, are absent
not because of critical sophistication but semantics: "'Irony,' even in
the narrower sense of verbal ambiguity and understatement, is a rare
pedant's term in English until the Victorian age . . . with reference to
Chaucer, I find no earlier use of the term than in a note of Thomas
Gray's, about 1760" (*Essays* 37) — and even this is an ambivalent
employment, as Birney observes. The semantic point is direct and well
taken, but conceals a greater problem of priority: "long before Gray,
readers were smiling with Chaucer at the incongruities of his pilgrims,
exploring his hidden satire, and experiencing the curious grim elation"
of his profound ironies (37).

Birney's remarkable understanding is that satire precedes irony, his-
torically speaking. This is not a question of precedence as privilege,
but of simple succession. Irony as a literary mode may well completely
exceed and categorically contain satire, but where chronology and his-
tory are concerned, he argues that literature came first to satire, then
to irony: only after satire had exhausted itself — as in Chaucer — was

pure irony refined. In terms of literary craftsmanship, the corollary is equally revealing: in Birney's thought, satire comes more easily and naturally to the author than irony. Satire for Birney is something almost effortless; irony requires more sophisticated and significant work, and indeed may be smithed carefully out of more raw and elemental satire. However, Birney's characterization of the satirist is not that of a father figure[21] for the ironist, but of a juvenile state that true irony outgrows. In this he expresses clearly his critical contempt for satire, and illustrates the reasons for his rejection of the satiric origins of "Bushed" — the first draft of which possesses irony in Birney's strict sense of verbal ambiguity and understatement, but not in his greater sense of comic or tragic irony.

Let us consider once more Birney's provisional definition of irony as "indirect satire." This is not, in and of itself, enough to establish a preference for satire over irony — whether tragic or comic in nature — let alone an inherent contempt for satire. Yet the character of satire's directedness is precisely where Birney begins to outline its artistic limitations in his *Essays on Chaucerian Irony*: "Chaucer, who was neither a cardinal, like Jerome, nor a militant feminist, like Christine de Pisan . . . took care to balance the disputes and satirize the satirizer" (10). While this is probably unfair to Jerome and Christine, it is an important illustration of Birney's disposition toward the satiric. Implicitly, satire is characterized as something *un*balanced and single-minded. It is a literary vector, a method designed to deliver a ballistic, incendiary message — like those of Jerome and Christine, according to Birney — without seriously considering what lies on the other side of its attack. Though the phrase "militant feminist" has been long a patronizing cliché, its echo of Frye's "militant irony" cannot but be overheard here. As if to drive the point home, Birney insists on following up with a military metaphor: that what little irony was to be found before Chaucer did but "camouflage a machine-gun nest of satiric assault" (*Essays* 10-11). The satirist is limited to one-sidedness; that literary technique of "satirizing the satirist" is about getting *beyond* satire — about a sophistication that eschews base satire for the elevated environs of irony, moving beyond the simple anonymity and obscurity of earlier and inferior satirists (*Essays* 30).

If satire is at all valuable in Birney's criticism, it is valued only as the adolescence of irony: a stage of development prior to literary maturity. He remarks that before Chaucer, "all previous preachers and satirists had been crude and forthright," that the accumulation of their crude

satiric strength "paved the way for subtlety" thereafter (*Essays* 11-12). Crude, preachy, unsubtle, perhaps even sectarian — all of Birney's terms condemn satire to the lowest possible levels of literary status. Then there is "the wooden objectivity typical of medieval satire" in contrast to "the living, lurking presence" of Chaucer (16-17). Satire, it seems, is not merely a debased art but a dead one — an art of petrifaction if not putrefaction. Irony is presented as subtle, alive, subjective, and original. Satire has priority over irony only in date, in the accidence of birth — as it does in the composition of "Bushed." Birney's dichotomy is reaching almost Brobdingnagian proportions — and he goes on.

In the essay "English Irony before Chaucer," Birney traces the history of irony to show it emerging from the limitations of satire to reach artistic freedom in the hands of Chaucer. He depicts a gradual sophistication of English irony from the "primitive jeering" (*Essays* 21) of satiric battle-irony up to the *Piers Plowman* of Langland, whom Birney holds as Chaucer's predecessor. This is, in essence, not much different than Frye's specific-to-general gradient of satire; yet Birney's characterizations of satire are consistently condemnatory, whereas Frye's display no such bias.[22] When Birney does speak of Chaucer's "satiric adroitness" as an ironist, he clearly implies that a mere satirist is somehow hopelessly gauche, obvious and fitful. To the word "primitive," Birney quickly joins "ponderous and pitiless" to characterize the jeering, satiric taunts of military and religious victors in the earliest Anglo-Saxon "tradition of literary sadism" (*Essays* 21-22). Proverbial irony he sidelines as "homely village aphorism" (23) — a limitation against which Bion and Martial, to name but two, might have had a choice word or three. We are very much in the main of Frye's provisional definition, but could not be further from Frye's ultimate estimation of satire's literary significance.

It is in Birney's subsequent comparison of Chaucer and his predecessor Langland that this negative critical attitude toward satire is most developed, and his disavowal of satire as a legitimate art is completed. Though Birney seems to list Langland at the head of all ironists prior to Chaucer, he and those like him are adamantly limited by the critic: "Langland — or whoever wrote *Piers Plowman* — was potentially a great ironist" (*Essays* 31). The implication is again clear: that satire's value is merely the potential for irony, its adolescence. The ironist is somehow a satirist come to fruition, one who has matured and grown beyond his roots. Langland has merely "the poise of irony" (31) —

the stance, but not the substance of it to be found in Chaucer. Where Langland is said to be simply ambivalent with respect to class and caste in his satire, Chaucer is depicted as more profoundly ambiguous, as more sophisticated than the disputes between the medieval estates. Langland is so degraded that Birney ultimately claims that the poet satirized "impotently yet with perfect self-confidence" (32), adding emasculation to his prior suggestions of death and sterility in satire, as opposed to the lively, virile art of Chaucer. Birney's conclusion is simply that "Chaucer, being Chaucer, had little to learn from these rare grim jests of Langland" (32), confirming his belief in a clear inferiority of satirist to ironist, satire to irony.[23]

Whether or not Birney is right about satire's nature[24] is, as I have said, not the issue here: he clearly thought satire limited, and both his criticism and his creative process reflect this equally. He held Chaucer above all as the first English writer who outgrew his early satires for a larger ironic art, much as Birney himself attempted to revise the early satire of "Bushed" into a tragic poem, intended to be cathartic both to the poet himself and to his readers. In perfect accordance with Birney's description of Chaucer, McLeod notes that Birney "is a man who chooses, for various reasons, to make a show of concealing his satiric thrusts" (McLeod 130). It is not enough to write a satire and then revise it completely into a tragic poem; he must make a show — and a decidedly ambivalent one — of his concealment of satire in *The Creative Writer*.

Revealing (or rather unconcealing) Birney's attitude to satire in theory and practice may help to resolve one of the outstanding peculiarities in the criticism. Throughout an otherwise panegyric encomium which places satire — as many critics do — at the centre of Birney's oeuvre, A.J.M. Smith expresses reservation not about the wit or poetic quality of the many thoroughly satiric or incidentally satirical poems, but about two rather more speculative concerns: whether they are "completely successful" (7), and why they so frequently "seem weak or forced" (8). This is surely an oddity. Birney is celebrated as a satirist, but the quality and consistency of his satires is questioned. Smith suggests that his peculiar critical position "may be partly due to the arbitrary typographical eccentricity that has been imposed" by Birney upon the volume of *Selected Poems*, but he quickly and rightly dismisses this criticism as mere "caviling" on his part (8). The problem is resolved by an insight that might have come straight from Birney's own criti-

cism: "Twenty-Third Flight" is especially "successful I think because the satire here directed against the world of tourism and public relations is directed, even if ever so gently, against the poet himself too" (Smith 7). What is tentatively drawn out here is the very idea of the satirist satirized that Birney describes as Chaucer's primary means of sophisticating satire into irony, and the sign of a pubescent satirist maturing into an ironist. While Smith does not make this larger connection to Birney's criticism, he does make the smaller but perhaps more important observation that the conclusion, both of the poem and the poet in the poem, is "tragi-comic," and ranks "Twenty-Third Flight" among the best of "the comic poems" (7). The key understanding is that when Birney makes a move beyond pure satire, it generally involves some deployment of dramatic ironies — that is, tragic or comic in nature — exactly as I have detailed in "Bushed." When Birney turns away from satire, whether over the course of a finished poem or in the prior course of his revisions, it is generally the deliberate turning toward the irony he describes in Chaucer. Like Steven and Robillard, Smith observes this movement more broadly in Birney's poetry, arguing that *Trial of a City* "fuses perfectly for the first time in Birney's work the two themes that Northrop Frye has named" as central to Canadian poetry, the satirical-comic and the isolative tragic (12). Yet this is not precisely what happened in the composition of "Bushed," which was revised from a harsher, purer strain of the former into the latter. Where all agree is in the general turning away from pure satire that Birney's work appears to present. Were similar turnings-away from satiric origins to be found in the drafts of other pieces, they might open the way to more complete understandings both of Birney's creative process and his works — perhaps even a fulfillment of the as-yet unrealized thesis on "Birney's Irony" for which both Milton Wilson (20) and George Woodcock (*Odysseus* 127) had such high hopes.

Notes

[1] *Turvey* was published in 1949; the sixth draft of "Bushed" is dated 1951, and Birney claims that the poem took him "nine drafts and two months" (*Creative* 32).

[2] It is possible that the drafts of "Bushed" were available as early as 1952 in a collection at the University of British Columbia, the manuscripts of which "date from 1948 to 1952," including an "original draft (ts., annotated)" of the poems in *Trial of a City* (Barr 16). Barr's description of the UBC holdings does not, however, specifically mention the drafts of "Bushed," although they are catalogued in the subsequent holdings in Toronto (86).

³ In my survey of the history of the Earle Birney Collection at the Thomas Fisher, I am indebted to two of its excellent research librarians, John Shoesmith and Tom Reid, who had the good fortune to have known Birney well.

⁴ This draft has no line numbers, and because of Birney's dense annotation of the typescript, to assign line numbers is almost impossible. The poem is, however, barely over a page long in the first draft, and less than a page thereafter, so I will simply cite the drafts in full as "Draft 1," "Draft 2," etc., throughout the article.

⁵ The first four of these deleted words are barely discernible; the line originally appears to have begun, "You ask me, peering through the steam without," with the remainder completely obscured.

⁶ There is no doubt that Birney thought himself a satirist: at one point, he founded a workshop called The Scriblerus Club, a name taken from a group of eighteenth-century satirists headlined by Swift and Pope (Cameron 211) who wrote under the collective pseudonym Martinus Scriblerus; at another, he explicitly identifies himself in artistic spirit with Juvenal (Birney, TAPE #1).

⁷ Hence the curious observation of Magdalene Redekop that satire is peculiar in its verbal activity: one may satirize but neither "tragedize" nor "comedize," though all three may be seen as foundational poetic forms.

⁸ This valuation of satire appears to have originated with the Peripatetic School (Aristotle, *Poetics* 4.6-11); it is not without critical pedigree or eminent support.

⁹ The first draft in particular shows significant revisions in typeface, pen, and pencil, reflecting Birney's immediate and enduring dissatisfaction with his satire; the second draft is a total departure from it.

¹⁰ Birney did later cross out "fall" and replace it with "roar," but this change still attributes the amplification or increase in energy to the water, not the professor.

¹¹ E.K. Brown, reviewing *Now Is Time*, notes that "what Chesterton called 'the impudent fatness of the few' is never far from Mr. Birney's mind" (Brown 293).

¹² By this, I allude both to Robillard's brilliant description of Birney's transformation of nature in "David" from "Wordsworthian idyll . . . into a Canadian deathtrap" (17) and to Wordsworth's conception of poetry as originating from "emotion recollected in tranquillity" [sic] in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, with which Birney's account in *The Creative Writer* appears to agree rather nicely.

¹³ Birney recalls, "I was perhaps twelve" (*Creative* 31).

¹⁴ Interestingly, in Birney's original vision of the poem, the "moosehorned cedars" appear animate, but do not move; only in his revisions do they make this uncanny progress.

¹⁵ As A.C. Bradley observes, "we cannot forget how the knocking that makes [the Porter] grumble sounded to Macbeth," and that "in pretending to be the porter of hell-gate he is terribly near the truth" (363). He catalogues similar moments of circumstantially grim satiric jests in *Hamlet* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*.

¹⁶ *Macbeth* qualifies as an exemplary tragedy both on Bradley's terms and on Frye's, and, of more immediate relevance, as a tragedy that uses the interaction of the tragic and satiric to produce the cathartic effect; Birney's allusion is, as noted, a convenient one for my purposes.

¹⁷ Macbeth is hoping for a quick-fix apothecary antidote or nip-tuck surgery; according to the classical tragic formula, bloodletting is the only cure, and his is the main ingredient of that tonic. In the preface to Bywater's great Oxonian translation of the *Poetics*, Gilbert Murray points out that "Greek tragedies were introduced into Rome, not on artistic but on superstitious grounds, as a *katharmos* against [or *katharsis* of] a pestilence," which he draws from Livy, 8.2 (*Poetics* 16).

¹⁸ Harold Bloom also springs to mind; I would, however, caution that to figure Birney's revision as *askesis* is likely an unhelpful over-reading, and that Shakespeare was probably

not the most immediate influence on Birney's mind in this process. He alludes freely to later authors, but most of his direct influences are older than Chaucer and quite various.

[19] Glickman's analysis also sharply illustrates a crucial difference between a dramatic tragedy and a tragic poem like Birney's: "We are left waiting with the protagonist at the end of the poem; Birney is not interested in what happens after, he is exploring sublime terror *as it happens*" (141). In other words, Birney is not concerned with the completion of a tragic plot, but with presenting a tragic protagonist in a more immediate and less formal poetic setting. However, much as I admire her insights, I take issue with Glickman's assertion that "'Bushed' is about the disruption of ego-boundaries" (140), which seems unsupportable given the content of the poem.

[20] "Paradoxically," grins Rowland, it was Dryden, a "professional satirist," who first sent Chaucerians in the wrong direction (77).

[21] The satirist, as characterized by Birney, may be a father-figure to the mature ironist only in Wordsworth's peculiar psychological sense, expressed in "My Heart Leaps Up," of the child as the father to the man, provided they are one and the same.

[22] Frye's early work on satire is another matter entirely.

[23] This rather direct attack on Langland is interesting; Birney uses him in an important speaking role in "The Damnation of Vancouver," but this critical perspective throws Birney's careful "reproduction" of his style, with "exactly the right balance between parody and recreation" (*Bush* 16), into serious ironic ambiguity.

[24] Given the problems with his definitions of "parody" and "burlesque," it is unlikely that Birney's historical and exclusively British conception of satire is robust or completely reliable as an overarching theory of the genre (or whatever satire may be). It would make little sense to call Pope and Swift adolescent ironists.

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