FIRST STATEMENT

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A MAGAZINE FOR YOUNG CANADIAN WRITERS.

Volume I Number 9

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ERIODICALS

ACCEPT THIS DAY - Irving Layton

Accept this day and set it quite apart
From other days; give to your heart
The Music and the measure of its beat.

With proud awareness store within the eye
A furrowed beauty of the partial sky,
Of windows closed against the sun's noon heat.

For they who laugh to know that laughter ends,
Perfection take that no time rends
Within the crystal compass of the brain.

Since like a sunbeam on a blind man's eyes
Is useless death, what mad surprise
Shall gender beauty from the broken plain?

HOUSE TO LET

Go build yourself a house,
Something against these unseasonable times, ---
The puffy, leering lips of old women.
The unanswerable protest of a hungry child.
The nakedness of men before the great terror.
The smoky sun sinking down
Like a stricken charger on a battlefield.

Shut each door!
Fasten each window!
Let no chink play eavesdropper
To the inmate's soul.

When the last nail
Has been rapped into place,
And lathe and saw and hammer
Stored away in the concrete basement,
Go out and listen to the wind -
The sun will look different tomorrow.

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A JEWISH RABBI

His voice is low. He leaves behind
The dross, the cold, the hates of men.
He will extol the ways of God
And grow disdainful of the blind.

Of Israel's breed he hums and sings.
He slowly stirs his jaundiced tea
And sighs for lemon... ach. His room
Is empty and he talks with kings.

CHAMELEONS - Leo Cox

Fort Charlotte is a little heat and dust
That history is heir to, blood and bones
Mere memory among abandoned stones
The little throbbing lizards hold in trust -

Wary chameleons sensitive to rust,
Now olive green with hope, grey with despair,
Gold in the sun, and now dissolved in air,
Changing forever as all creatures must -

Even as we, though constant to our past,
Meet every circumstance remade and new,
Aware as water to the weather's breath.
Changing with life, we hold our essence fast;
And shall, perhaps, though taking on its hue,
Endure beyond the ashen touch of death...

HURRY, LOITERER - Kay Smith

Hurry, loiterer in the field,
steam up on that threshing machine,
stop nuzzling the thought of rich yields
in limbs mouth when all the world was green
but for the utter white of her loping shoulder;
hurry, loiterer in the field,
on the black wind rattle crows' wings,
wind pummels the sweating back with sharp fists,
the rain explodes tears at the wrists
taut on the wheel of the loiterer
in the summer lands of her breasts.

MADAME'S DREAM - Dorothy Taylor-Stoll

Madame, very young, very perky, very plump, sat rocking and planning. Her hair was black, her skin ruddy, her lips red and moist. She was with child. That very morning Monsieur had given her the two front plots of land to make the way she wanted, and now he was at the side with the men clearing for a new barn while Madame sat idle and dreamed. Madame was not very clever with her mind, not very quick with her hands, not very sharp with her tongue. But her round black eyes loved colour! To her there was no life without it and it was she who first sensed the short-comings of their new home, and as much as their poverty allowed planned to improve them. She started by pestering Monsieur until he white-washed the walls and painted the shingles red.

She sat rocking now and dreaming into the future... About a lilac bush on each side of the house and two rows of orange lilies down a middle path, two green squares of lawn with two rings of pansies in them... about an arch with heavy vines... a tree for the child that was coming, and one for each of the next as far as where the gate was going to be... about a blue oilcloth on the floor, dishes with blue and yellow edges... patchwork quilts on bed and sofa, hooked rugs... frilly white curtains on the two front windows, with two green plants to live all winter in red cans behind them on the window-sill.

Madame squirmed deliciously, loosened the band around her waist, and planned some more... Monsieur must not let his shirt stick with sweat to his back, not warm his feet in the oven, not squeeze so tight, not hurt when kissing. And in the summer when the child came he must build a balcony... he promised. She would paint it herself, brown like chocolate, and some day at Corpus Christi...

And all that Madame dreamed came to pass, and much more. For in the same year the men who had helped Monsieur clear for the barn began to clear for themselves, laid foundations in the earth and made copies of the red-roofed house. They were neighbours of Madame and Monsieur. And for years after, Monsieur and Messieurs chopped, stacked, hauled, planted sowed, reaped - together... bought, sold, sang, smoked, laughed - together... And Madame and Mesdames sewed, knitted, darned, hooked - together; played with their children, cared for their men, laughed, cried, suffered - together. They grew spring salads in their own gardens, lawns, lilies, and big blue pansies; went down to the lake to wash, fed their cattle, and went to mass in their gigs - together. And in that time some died. Some lived. And every year when the time came, the brown balcony was decked out for the altar.

And in that time too Madame and Monsieur had cause to plant four young saplings, that grew higher than the house itself in such a little while. And children who were not there when the men built houses grew with them and then built houses of their own. Then things were the same as before, only Madame and Monsieur were alone again. This time it seemed as if they had slept out their dream, and there was now only a time of resting, and waiting...

It was when Madame was grandmere, and Monsieur grandpere that things began to change. The years passed then like the spinning of a weathercock, and les petits enfants too soon grew big. Jean and Joseph, babies no more, suddenly tired of old things, and old people. Henri tired of old ways of doing things. Edouard tired of planting, ploughing, killing, selling. And George - he wanted to be a priest. Helene was tired of black serge and catalogue fittings: Jacquelin went with her beau to the mining country... Agathe into service, Giselde into a factory, Berthe married in St. Jerome. The city sucked them up indifferently... They had all gone when Monsieur died, and the city decided to visit Madame and look into the heart of the red-roofed house.

It sent in road-builders first, men who scratched the earth into narrow strips and blasted away the roots and rocks, men who threw down rubble and raised dust - to make a road to the city. And the city came in, sniffing at the old house and its copies, too old to be trim and neat. It pulled down some of them and built country lodges where it could come to play... But Madame is stubborn and stays there still, in the old house, with its white skin blistered and hanging in shreds. She sits on the faded balcony, very fat, very dirty, dusty-dull in a black, shapeless dress, rocking in the same old chair. Only now there is no more planning... just remembering, watching, waiting. There is no more laughter in the heart of the red-roofed house.

Madame has learned to spit now, neatly, into the inch-wide cracks between the balcony boards at her feet, to curse, to cheat, to cough in the dust, to tremble with the power of the drill. Her hair, still black, is matted and looped on top with four bone pins. Her skin is brown and crisp, her lips taut over decayed bone and pale dried gums. But her eyes are bright still, and what they see frightens her...

They've started to cut a newer, wider road, straight through her best berry field, and they've dug up her lawns to make a ditch where water lies stagnant after a rain. She sits now watching her dirty ragged goats nodding all day long with dribbling beards... and they watch her, their red-rimmed eyes blinking out their own inscrutable philosophy. She sits watching the dry, sour rhubarb stubbornly pushing its leaves, like elephant's ears, through a heap of piled-up tools... watching the lilac bloom and wither... the weeds choke her garden... the spreading yellow patches left ugly by the pressure of barrels, picks, shovels... watching oily rags flutter on the line... men wiping dirty sweat from under arms and back of shoulders... watching power poles take the place of the trees she loved, and the roots of the trees uptorn and naked on the earth, caked with mud, dried with wind.

She sits watching men set charges and run; and the rickety table outside, jarred by repeated blasts, shakes under its burden of bottles, grinders, jars, old baskets of bits and ends... watching two pot vases of faded artificial flowers bloom so ludicrously, while real ones, no longer noticed, are blasted away. They sway gently in the cracked pots and Madame remembers her orange lilies that bowed so in the breeze. She sits there still, watching the four burnt-edged young pines stuck in the stones and

dust of the road to mark off soft shoulder, trees that had lived in green meadows and wound their roots round the rocks of the soul... even as she watches the great city monster bite the earth and snap its iron teeth.

The city trusts Madame. It gave her the keys to its cottages and she hangs them on the splintered frame inside her low door-way. One by one they are taken from her and she's left alone, listening sullenly to the echoes of new laughter... to the splash of warm bodies against water... to the put-put-put of a motor on the lake... to music that rubs harsh against the night velvet. But Madame does not trust the city. She sits alone, sick of it all, waiting only for the snows to come and heal the wounds in the woods and the meadows, waiting for the smoke to curl once more in silence through a calm, grey sky, for her scrawny cur to fatten into a dog again underneath the warm oven for the trees to bend under the whiteness of heaven...

For when the spring comes again she knows there will be no more watching or waiting... only the side of a wide, wide road, a watery sunlight, and dust in a thin wind blowing.

UNSATISFIED - Lois Darroch

I shall go out into the streets
even as the seeker in the Song of Songs.

I shall pass along the tree-bound streets
walking fearfully as the long leaved arms reach down
crooking lamp-lighted fingers at me.

Only the thought that I might meet him,
coming head back, heels clicking gladly after toes,
keeps me there as the shadows marshalling behind
fling forward to confront me, suddenly long and lean.

The sound of my footsteps besieges the houses
and is thrown back decisively.
Even so my longing for him goes out
and falls back bleeding to my breast.

Why does he not come to me?
Why does he leave me alone in the night?
Why does he stay there, pouring, stirring,
holding the tubes up against the light,
watching the little specks dance into clouds
and clear again into lucency?

Why does he stay there, measuring, figuring,
letting the day hours eat into night into morning?
Why must a man cry after man-business at midnight
when a woman would fling away worlds
For a time of sweet talking and touching?

I will go back. The echoes hound me with emptiness.
Even now, perhaps, he waits behind the lighted window.
Quick, quick, quick, even now he may be there,
his dear form waiting there.

Quick, quick, and quicker,
eagerly through the streets and up the steps and
up the stairs.
The lighted door is open.
Be quick to reach it, be quick to look around.

Only the empty chairs.

Still the man-business at midnight.

No time of sweet talking tonight.

EARLE BIRNEY'S "DAVID" - John Sutherland

W.E. Collin, the author of "White Savannahs", discussing the aims of "The Montreal Poets", Scott, Smith, Klein and Kennedy, tells us that these writers reacted to the materialism of the city, "but no, decidedly no," did not turn back to the country-side. Not only did they not return to the country of the Victorians, but they tended to let country landscape disappear altogether from their poems. What is true of them is even more emphatically true of those recent writers who have a kinship with them. P.K. Page, in a discussion of Canadian poetry in "Preview", (a witty summary rather than a criticism), complains that the prizes go to those who write of "the first trillium on the hills." "Hitch-hike to the towns", she advises young Canadian poets, "and forget the country of your own head." P.K.Page writes out of personal experience and she describes her own poetical development. She wrote for years of almost nothing but the first trillium on the hills, and then new circumstances and a new enviroment, the impact of other forces, worked a complete change in her poetry. She, in common with the majority of our modernists, has come to regard the country as too insignificant for inclusion. They have developed an antipathy to the country landscape on the basis of its meaning and importance, but there are also reasons of style that cause them to disregard it. Recent poetry has been affected in greater or less degree by the stream of consciousness technique. The rhythms may not move swiftly, but the manner of passing from one concept to another gives an impression of speed. The poetry does not stop long enough over one thing to give us those images of description that are recognizable as the landscape of a particular country. Further, it does not employ the kind of detail that would allow it to describe landscapes of this kind. It may make a brutal descent into fact, giving us truth in the hardest, crudest terms (often with a salutary

effect). But average facts concerning the flow and shape of the landscape, the well-worn facts that are handled by everyone, are regarded as homely and out of date. The country may occasionally appear, but it is always curiously transformed.

Earle Birney, in employing the mountains and scenery of the Pacific coast, is in no danger of reverting to the first trillium on the hills. Of all our young modernist poets, he is the only one who has made consistent use of a Canadian landscape. "David", with its sparseness of language, its unpretentious rhythm acting like an understatement, brings the mountains so near that they hover and press upon the mind. In "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. A poem like "Hands", almost in spite of its heady images, gains a real beauty because it draws in factual details of a familiar landscape. All the best work in this volume - "David and other Poems" - makes use of the Canadian environment.

There is some comparison, I think, between "David" and the narrative poems of Robinson Jeffers. Both writers take the mountains of the Pacific coast for their setting. A blood-pact between two young men is struck by the full weight of a force of evil. The picture of David after his fall on the mountain presents a paradox of the good and the bad such as fascinates Jeffers:

".... He lay still, with his lean
Young face upturned and strangely unmarred, but his legs
Splayed beneath him, beside the final drop,
Six hundred feet sheer to the ice."

David holds the evil force imprisoned in him, but, (as Jeffers would have drawn him), wears an innocent face. The problem raised by the fall - whether to preserve David as a permanent cripple, with an uncertain hold on life, or to end his suffering at once - is the kind of problem that absorbs Jeffers.

Birney, however, may not have been influenced by Jeffers, except as he is influenced by the tradition of narrative poetry and its best modern examples. His poem has a warmth and intimacy and a personal note that do not appear in Jeffers. It is not as deliberately abstract as Jeffers', and does not have a structure of the same proportions. The initiative to write factual narrative comes, perhaps, from Dr. Pratt's poetry, if it has any immediate source. More important, in any case, then the discussion of literary influences, is the fact that Birney, by his use of a straightforward narrative medium and the incorporation in it of a Canadian environment, establishes a distinction between himself and those younger poets with whom he has a kinship in style.

"David" has that curious rhythm with which the readers of Birney's poems have grown familiar. The conversational manner of modern poetry is present here, but in a positive, more emphatic sense. It widens its scope and gains in freedom and yet shows a tendency to be in some manner formalized. It becomes almost a creed and a belief, and is an expression of something basic in the author's mind and personality. The conversational style, one supposes, has developed partly as a result of modern life grow'

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in complexity and pressing its weight against the poet. In Birney this fact is taken for granted, either consciously or subconsciously: not only that, but the obstacles are now invited, and the difficulties are enticed into the poem as desirable factors. The characteristic rhythm is the frank admission of complexity, and it derives from a belief in the power of the spirit to absorb it. It widens in scope, it includes more of thought and emotion, as life in general and modern life in particular press and bear against it. It catches and holds all the complex elements in a great net. Since nothing is lost in this way, only patience and time are required to set the thought or subject in its proper focus, and to clothe it in the right frame of words. The rhythm has a recuperative power. It invites falls and lapses, because strength is developed out of them, and more than the initial progress is made. It moves slowly and patiently, with eyes like a microscope, and comes gradually in contact with the living substances.

In "David" it is a pedestrian rhythm without any pretension. It seems inevitable for the description of mountain-climbing:

"...At an outthrust we balked
Till David clung with his left to a dint in the scarp,
Lobbed the iceaxe over the rocky lip,
Slipped from his holds and hung by the quivering pick,
Twisted his long legs up into space and kicked
To the crest. Then grinning, he reached with his freckled wrist
And drew me up after."

It makes poetry from a prose event like picking raspberries:

"... The woods were alive
With the vaulting of mule-deer and drenched with clouds of the morning,
Till we burst at noon to the flashing and floating round
Of the peaks. Coming down we picked in our hats the bright
And sunhot raspberries, eating them under a mighty
Spruce, while a marten moving like quicksilver scouted us."

But the style can rise to the greater force and vividness of the last section:

"... At last through the fanged
And blinding seracs I slid to the milky wrangling
Falls at the glacier's snout, through the rocks piled huge
On the humped moraine, and into the spectral larches,
Alone."

The title poem on the whole is characteristic of the other poems in his volume. Space and air are admitted into our contracted modernist poetry. The scope is widened until factual event and intelligible emotion are included, but without the loss of imagery. The knotted complexities of style are unravelled and the power of phrasing remains. "David" is an important poem, and Birney's book is a significant contribution to Canadian literature.

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Subscriptions ($1.00 a year) and contributions should be sent to the Editor, John Sutherland, at 1488 Crescent St., Montreal. Other communications should be sent to our business manager, Mrs. Maxine Bigg, at the same addres