

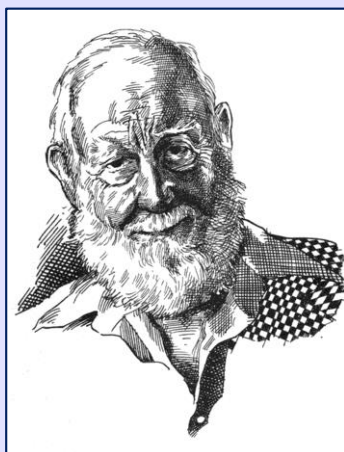
Northern Voices: Innovation



*Storm over
the Fields*
Carl Schaefer
1937

Carl Schaefer (1903-1995) was born in Hanover, Ontario. His paintings focus on rural South Ontario. This particular painting gives the sense of impending doom that pervaded the late 1930s. The Depression, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, the Spanish Civil War, the capitulation in Munich indicated that the world had somehow lost its bearings. The painting is representational but its bright and accentuated colours have the emotional force of the colour-field abstract paintings that followed the war.

This session deals mainly with Canadian poetry and culture from the 1930s to the beginning of the 1950s. From anxious reality to an uncertain future. From thoughts of war to fears of annihilation.



Portrait by Isaac Bickerstaff

Earle Birney (1904-1995)

Born in Calgary, Birney spent most of his life in British Columbia. In his youth he worked as a park ranger in the Rocky Mountains. He studied at UBC ultimately graduating in English and did graduate work at the University of Toronto. He became a communist during the Depression but disavowed this later. During World War II, he served with the Canadian Army in Holland. After the war he established Canada's first Creative Writing Program at UBC. After two marriages and numerous affairs, he shared the last 20 years of his life with Wilan Low.

Alaska Passage

the firs tramp downwards through
the fog in green crescendo to the
foreshore's pied commotion of
bristled rocks and blanching drift

the first thorough generation to the
throughout the following
downwards

SHOES' PLCD COMMISSION OF BISTED ROKS
and blanching drift

Emily Carr, 1931
Sea Drift, Edge of Forest



The first poem of this section is Birney's description of a voyage from Vancouver to Alaska. The inside passage goes between Vancouver Island and other smaller islands and the shore of mainland British Columbia. This was the same trip that the Klondike miners took on their way to fame and fortune in the Yukon.

The poem is an example of technopaegnia (Greek *technē*, art, and *paígnion*, game) - poetry printed or written in a shape which reflects the subject of the poem Also called figure, visual or pattern poetry.

Some lines hang downward like the branches of the trees beside the water. The driftwood cast up on the rocks is described in jumbled lines. Later we see the log shoot angling up from the shore and feel the tide sliding away from it.

Lost in the shape of the poem is the fact that it is actually a sonnet. It has fourteen lines (beginning with “ka passage...”) and occasional rhymes (alas-pass, ranges-exchanges, side-tide). The first and last lines can be considered “circular” – the end of the line links back to its beginning. This gives a sense of the slow and seemingly endless voyage.

The ship travels though the land of Emily Carr (1871-1945).

palimpsest – parchment (or other writing material) which has had the original writing effaced to make room for new.



In 1983 Birney worked with the percussion group Nexus to add sounds to the recitation of his poem. This clip is from the 1981 NFB film *Earle Birney: Portrait of a Poet* directed by Donald Winkler. Unfortunately no longer available.

David

Birney wrote his most famous poem in 1940. After numerous rejections it was finally published in 1941. He wanted to record some of the most cherished mountain-experiences of his youth. The poem describes the exploits of David, an experienced climber, and his friend Bob. On the ascent of a difficult peak, David falls and injures himself severely. Not wishing to endure a lingering death or a life in a wheelchair, David asks Bob to push him over the cliff to his death. Bob does so, later recounting that David had accidentally fallen to his death. Despite numerous rumours about its authenticity, the story is completely fictional.



Birney in the mountains, 1927

Although the tale is fictional, Birney was aware of the dangers of severe injuries in the mountains. Because it takes so long to arrange a rescue, a severe injury will often result in a slow and painful death before help can arrive.

Nevertheless, the rumours persist. In *The Cow Jumped over the Moon* (1972, p 64), Birney recounted that some colleagues at UBC had actually overheard one freshman during fall registration say to another:

"I'm really gonna be sunk in English. You know whose section they put me in?"
 "No. Whose?"
 "Birney's."
 "Who's he?"
 "The guy that wrote 'David'."
 "David, who's he?"
 "Yuh dope. It's a poem, yuh had it in grade 10. He's the sonofabitch who pushed his best friend offen a cliff."
 "Jeez, you better git a transfer."

Some textual notes for David (selected from *The Cow Jumped over the Moon*):

arête: not just a "ridge" but "an acute and rugged crest of a mountain range" French for fishbone
bergschrand: the particular chasm, generally widest and deepest of all crevasses, created where the top of the glacier pulls or melts away from the rock of the mountain; what Bob calls a "grave-cold maw"; German for mountain-cleavage

Cambrian waves: a reference to the earliest inhabited seas, whose clay shores, pressed to slate, preserved imprints of primitive organisms, the first fossils, now items of our Information Culture; actually I should have said Devonian or Jurassic for the Banff area, but I preferred the sound of "Cambrian."

chimney: a vertical rock-cleft wide enough to allow insertion of all or part of the body and facilitate climbing

cirque: circular or semi-circular valley gouged out of a mountain's flank by earlier glacial action

col: the pass or low-point of a ridge between two peaks

edgenail: specially tempered steel nails studding soles and edges of climbers' boots

gyrating: here, the peculiar spiralling motion of a bird with a broken wing

larches: sometimes called tamaracks; unlike pines they are deciduous, shedding their needles; consequently in high altitudes they look skeletal, "spectral," by September

saxifrage: a plant that wedges itself into cracks on high rockfaces, a lovely "innocent" whose very act of living is also an act of destruction; a Germanic word meaning "rock-breaker"

serac: a pillar or mound of ice weathered out on the surface of a glacier

snowbridge: when water, melted in the daytime, courses over the top of a glacier and down into crevasses, it often hollows out bridges of snow or ice; some are strong enough to permit the passage of climbers; without such a bridge it is particularly difficult to cross a

bergschrand traverse: a climbers' term for horizontal routes across peaks or ranges



This and the next clip are from the NFB film *Earle Birney: Portrait of a Poet* (1981) directed by Donald Winkler (currently unavailable). The selections from the poem are read by Earl Pennington. This part describes some of the early mountain-experiences of David and Bob and their first sight of the peak called The Finger.

The peak was upthrust
Like a fist in a frozen ocean of rock that swirled
Into valleys the moon could be rolled in. Remotely unfurling
Eastward the alien prairie glittered. Down through the dusty

Skree on the west we descended, and David showed me
How to use the give of shale for giant incredible
Strides. I remember, before the larches' edge,
That I jumped a long green surf of juniper flowing

Away from the wind, and landed in gentian and saxifrage
Spilled on the moss. Then the darkening firs
And the sudden whirring of water that knifed down a fern-hidden
Cliff and splashed unseen into mist in the shadows.

One Sunday on Rampart's arête a rainsquall caught us,
And passed, and we clung by our blueing fingers and bootnails
An endless hour in the sun, not daring to move
Till the ice had steamed from the slate. And David taught me

How time on a knife-edge can pass with the guessing of fragments
Remembered from poets, the naming of strata beside one,
And matching of stories from schooldays. ... We crawled astride
The peak to feast on the marching ranges flagged

By the fading shreds of the shattered stormcloud. Linger

There it was David who spied to the south, remote,
And unmapped, a sunlit spire on Sawback, an overhang
Crooked like a talon. David named it the Finger.



This selection occurs just after David falls. Bob climbs down to him and finds him severely injured. David asks to push him over the cliff:

I lay dazed and stared at the long valley,
The glistening hair of a creek on the rug stretched
By the firs, while the sun leaned round and flooded the ledge,
The moss, and David still as a broken doll.

I hunched to my knees to leave, but he called and his voice
Now was sharpened with fear. "For Christ's sake push me over!
If I could move ... Or die. ..." The sweat ran from his forehead,
But only his eyes moved. A hawk was buoying

Blackly its wings over the wrinkled ice.
The purr of a waterfall rose and sank with the wind.
Above us climbed the last joint of the Finger
Beckoning bleakly the wide indifferent sky.

Even then in the sun it grew cold lying there. ... And I knew
He had tested his holds. It was I who had not. ... I looked
At the blood on the ledge, and the far valley. I looked
At last in his eyes. He breathed, "I'd do it for you, Bob."



This painting in the Canadian War Museum shows Canadian soldiers in Holland. In the invasion of German-occupied Europe the Canadian infantry were responsible for the liberation of Holland. Both Birney and Colville were with the Canadian forces.

December, my dear, on the road to Nijmegen,
between the stones and the bitter skies was your face.
At first only the gatherings of graves
along the lank canals, each with a frosted
billy-tin for motto; the bones of tanks
beside the stoven bridges; old men in the mist
knifing chips from a boulevard of stumps;
or women riding into the wind of the rims of their cycles,
like tattered sailboats tossing over the cobbles

...

And so in the sleet as we neared Nijmegen,
searching my heart for the hope of our minds,
for the proof in the left of the words we wish,
for laughter outrising at last the rockets,
I saw the rainbow answer of you,
and you and your seed who, peopling the earth, would distil
our not impossible dreamed horizon,
and who, moving within the nightmare Now,
give us what creed we have for our daily crimes
for this road that arrives at no future,
for this guilt
in the griefs of the old and the graves of the young.

Birney's *Mappemundi* and Alliterative Verse

Saxon and Old English verse used alliteration rather than rhyme as its major mnemonic device

Each line was composed of two halves (*hemistichs*) separated by a pause (*caesura*). Each hemistich has two stressed syllables. Birney follows this rhythmic pattern:

NO not this OLD WHALE hall can WHELM us

In the most common form of Old English verse, alliteration occurs between the first stressed syllable in each hemistich. The second stressed syllable in the first hemistich often alliterates as well, but the second stressed syllable in the second hemistich does not. Birney occasionally follows this format:

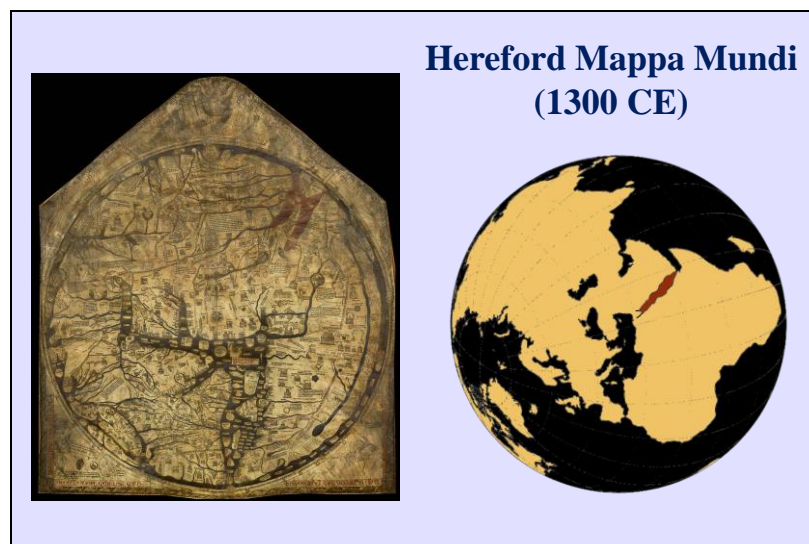
topple in maelstrom **t**read back never

However, Birney also uses different alliteration patterns, often involving two sounds:

Adread in that **m**ere we **d**rift toward **m**ap's end

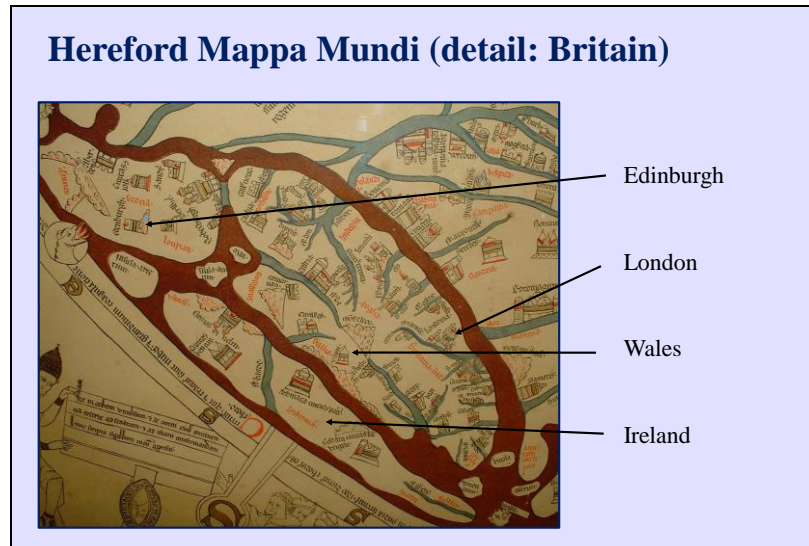
Old-English alliterative verse, based on German, Norse and Saxon poetry, was used in the famous epic poem *Beowulf*, which describes how its eponymous hero defeated the monster Grendel. Although alliteration is a common technique in all English poetry, the formal rules of the Old-English form were not used in modern English until the 20th Century, which brought a revival of the form both in translations of Old English poems (e. g. Ezra Pound's *The Seafarer*, 1911) and in new poems (e. g. W. H. Auden's *The Wanderer*, 1930).

Birney's poem uses alliteration but does not follow the most common forms (such as that used in *Beowulf*).



Probably the most famous medieval Mappa Mundi is in Hereford Cathedral. The map is 52 inches (132 cm) in diameter on vellum (parchment from calfskin). By convention the centre of the world is located at the city of Jerusalem. The map is oriented so that the north is to the left and the east at the top. The map can be compared to an accurate projection on the right. The seas

and rivers are exaggerated – the mapmakers knew more about these than the intervening land. Britain and Ireland are at the lower left.



This shows the lower left of the Hereford mappa mundi in detail.

Mappemounde

No not this old whalehall can whelm us
 shiptamed gullgraced soft to our glidings
 Harrows that mere more which squares our map
 See in its north where scribe has marked *mermen*
 shore-sneakers who croon to the seafarer's girl
 next year's gleewords East and west *nadders*
 flamefanged bale-twisters their breath dries up tears
 chars in the breast-hoard the brave picture-faces
 Southward *Cetegrande* that sly beast who sucks in
 with whirlwind also the wanderer's pledges
 That sea is hight Time it hems all hearts' landtrace
 Men say the redeless reaching its bounds
 topple in maelstrom tread back never
 Adread in that mere we drift toward map's end

From a paper "Earle Birney's "Mappemounde": Visualizing Poetry With Maps" by Adele J. Haft *Cartographic Perspectives*, 43, 4-19, 2002. And from Birney's *The Cow Jumped over the Moon* (1972)

Line 1. "Whalehall": i.e., "the sea" (a "kenning" or figurative substitute - a place where whales get together)

Line 3. “Mere”: Old English, “the sea”

Line 6. “Gleewords”: Old English glioword, “song” “Nadders”: Old English naedre, “adder,” “serpent,” “dragon”

Line 7. “Bale”: Old English bealu, “evil,” “destructive”

Line 8. “Breast-hoard”: Old English breosthord, “thoughts”; i.e., “the memory of loved ones” (Birney 1972, 85)

Line 9. “Cetegrande”: Old French cete grande, “great whale”

Line 11. “Hight”: Old English haten, “called,” “named”

Line 12. “Redeless”: Old English raedleas, “resourceless,” “helpless”

Line 14. “Adread”: Old English ofdraedd, “frightened,” “terrified”

Around the map the artist usually drew pictures of the winds or the denizens of the sea (merman and whales).

The meaning of the poem is not clear. Birney wrote the poem while traveling home from England after the war:

Think of the speaker as a man, ancient or modern, saying goodbye to his girl before setting out across an ocean or some other bigness of space. But really, he's more concerned with the map of time for it's the years, not the miles, that make lovers forget. Time's the enemy of us all, the beast that catches up with any world that's willing to set aside loving for voyages into seas of hate.


However, the poem is intended not as moral allegory so much as Hardyean irony. I began it in 1945 in England while I lay in a crowded military sickbay, waiting for a hospital ship to take me home, listening meantime to the exchanges of eternal fidelity between nearby wardmates and their English girl friends. Our ship, the *El Nil* (ironically, once the private yacht of that old roué, King Farouk), brought us safely to Halifax, but it was my impression that many of those English girls would be detained by mermen on their Anglosaxon shores and many of our seafarers lose their pledges to Cetegrande before map's end. (from *The Cow Jumped over the Moon*, 1972).



This is part of the *NFB Poets on Film No 2* (1977). Animation is by Janet Perlman.
Film can be viewed on the NFB website
https://www.nfb.ca/film/poets_on_film_no_2/


I met a lady
 on a lazy street
hazel eyes
 and little plush feet

her legs swam by
 like lovely trout
eyes were trees
 where boys leant out



The Bear on the Delhi Road

It is not easy to free
myth from reality
or rear this fellow up
to lurch lurch with them
in the tranced dancing of men



Birney's poem is about a bear captured in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains and taught to dance so that its keepers could support their simple existence. The bear is kept under control using a rope through its nostrils. Life is not easy either for the bear or for his keepers.



This is Birney's love poem for Wailan Low. Wailan Low studied with Birney. She lived with him for the last 20 years of his life. She graduated in law and is presently a judge in the Ontario Superior Court of Justice.

The clip is from the NFB film *Earle Birney: Portrait of a Poet* (1981).

Anne Wilkinson (1910-1961)

Born into the Osler family (which included Edmund, the politician and founder of the Royal Ontario Museum, and William, the physician), Wilkinson grew up in a life of privilege. Married to a pediatric surgeon, she devoted most of her life to domesticity. However, she published her first poems in the 1940s, and ultimately published two volumes of poetry before her untimely death. She was a patron and editor of the *Tamarack Review*.




Lens



The poet's daily chore
Is my long duty;
To keep and cherish my good lens
For love and war
And wasps about the lilies
And mutiny within.

My woman's eye is weak
And veiled with milk;
My working eye is muscled
With a curious tension,
Stretched and open
As the eyes of children;
Trusting in its vision
Even should it see
The holy holy spirit gambol
Counterheadwise,
Lithe and warm as any animal.

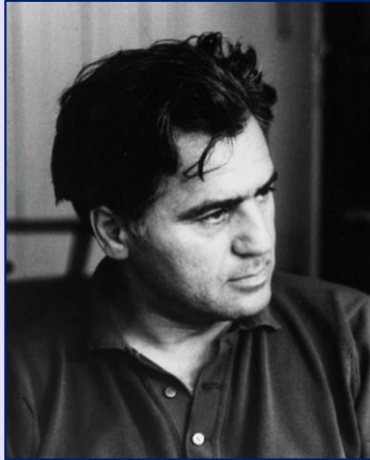
Wilkinson's poem provides an extended metaphor of the process of composing poetry. An experience must be noticed and captured. Then it must be developed so that the meaning can be found.



In my dark room the years
Lie in solution,
Develop film by film.
Slow at first and dim
Their shadows bite
On the fine white pulp of paper.

And death, in black and white
Or politic in green and Easter film,
Lands on steely points, a dancer
Disciplined to the foolscap stage,
The property of poets
Who command his robes, expose
His moving likeness on the page.

The ultimate meaning is that of death. How to understand it and how to experience it is a major goal of poetry.



Portrait by Sam Tata, 1961

Irving Layton (1912-2006)

Born in Romania, Layton came to Montreal when he was one year old. After being expelled from high school he was tutored by A. M. Klein. He attended McGill University, where he interacted with David Lewis and edited the *McGilliad*. After graduating, he became a prolific and rebellious poet, writing free verse that dealt with sex and politics. A lover of women, Layton was married five times.

Layton's birth name was Israel Pincu Lazarovitch.

Layton was a role model for Leonard Cohen, who wrote (2006)

Always after I tell him
what I intend to do next
Layton solemnly inquires:
Leonard, are you sure
you're doing the wrong thing?

Layton's five wives were Faye Lynch, Betty Sutherland, Aviva Cantor, Harriet Bernstein, and Anna Potter.



The Improved Binoculars

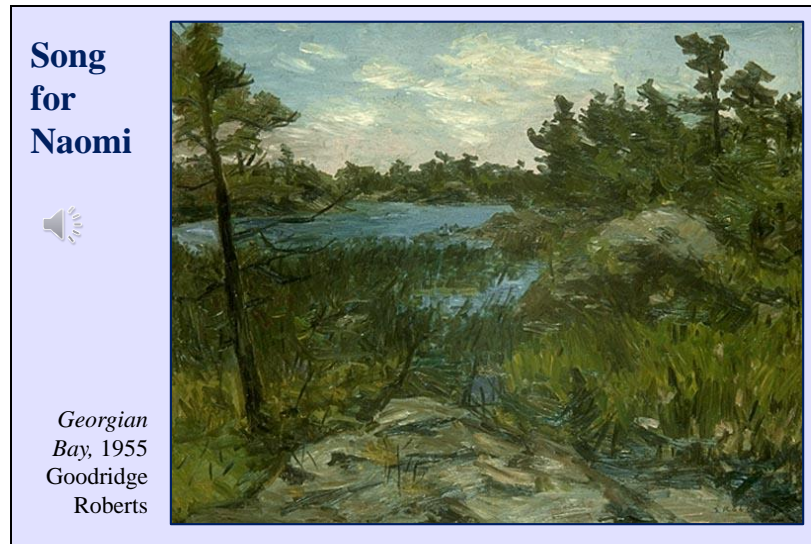
And the rest of the populace, their mouths
distorted by an unusual gladness, bawled
thanks
to this comely and ravaging ally, asking
Only for more light with which to see
their neighbour's destruction.
All this I saw through my improved
binoculars.



Shattered Landscape
Alex Colville 1945

Layton enlisted in the Canadian army in 1942. He served as an instructor at Camp Petawawa but did not go overseas.

His poem *The Improved Binoculars* is a cynical view of the post war world, where revenge and exploitation took precedence over any possibility of compassion.



Sometimes Layton surprises us and in the cynicism comes a brief burst of tenderness – such as in this poem where he notes how much his daughter has grown over the summer:

Who is that in the tall grasses singing
By herself, near the water?
I can not see her
But can it be her
Than whom the grasses so tall
Are taller,
My daughter,
My lovely daughter?



Layton's poem about the need to decide on one's own rules for life, is illustrated by a painting by William Kurelek (1927-1977). This was made while Kurelek was being treated in a mental hospital in London. He attempts to find in his brain what has caused him to be the way he is. His soul is like the sad rat in the centre who cannot find his way out of the maze of loneliness, bullying, abuse, social isolation, artistic failure, political propaganda, and industrial depersonalization.

By walking I found out
Where I was going.

By intensely hating, how to love.
By loving, whom and what to love.

By grieving, how to laugh from the belly.

Out of infirmity, I have built strength.
Out of untruth, truth.

From hypocrisy, I wove directness.

Almost now I know who I am.
Almost I have the boldness to be that man.

Another step
And I shall be where I started from.



In the aftermath of World War II, the world had to come to grips with the horrible fact of the Holocaust and how this could have occurred in civilized Europe. Poetry has difficulty in coming to terms with the horrors of the holocaust. As Theodor Adorno stated in 1950

Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch
(Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.)

This is often quoted as "There can be no poetry after Auschwitz."

The illustration is Alex Colville's *Bodies in a Grave, Belsen* (1946). The painting is based on sketches he made when the Canadian and British troops came to the Belsen concentration camp in Northern Germany in May 1945. This was not an extermination camp but thousands of inmates had died there from starvation and disease. Among those who died was Anne Frank.



Traudl Junge, Hitler's
Secretary, Photograph
from the 1990s

Das Wahre Ich

She tells me she was a Nazi; her father also.
Her brother lies buried under the defeat
and rubble of Stalingrad.
She tells me this, her mortal enemy, a Jew.

We are twenty years removed from war.
She urges on me candied biscuits and tea,
and her face is touched by a brief happiness
when I praise her for them and for the mobiles
she has herself fashioned
in the comfortless burdensome evenings.

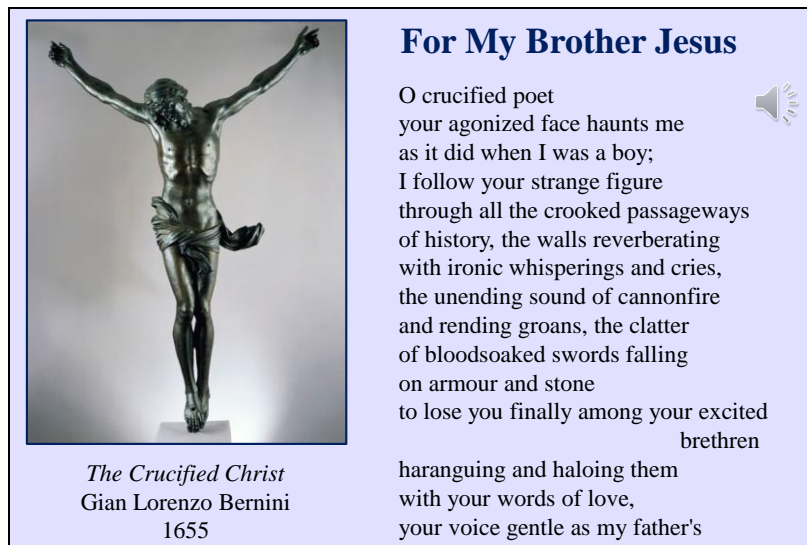
das wahre Ich – the real me, one's true self.

I do not know the woman that Layton describes in this poem. The photograph is of Traudl Junge, who was Hitler's secretary. She is meant to illustrate the lack of concern and attention that was common among the German people during the Nazi era.

She is quoted in the 2004 movie *Der Untergang* (Downfall). The movie quotes a documentary *Im toten Winkel* (Blindspot) in which Junge (who died in 2002) states:

Of course, the horrors, of which I heard in connection of the Nuremberg trials; the fate of the 6 million Jews, their killing and those of many others who represented different races and creeds, shocked me greatly, but, at that time, I could not see any connection between these things and my own past. I was only happy that I had not personally been guilty of these things and that I had not been aware of the scale of these things. However, one day, I walked past a plaque on the Franz-Joseph Strasse (in Munich) on the wall in memory of Sophie Scholl. I could see that she had been born the same year as I, and that she had been executed the same year I entered into Hitler's service. And, at that moment, I really realised that it was no excuse that I had been so young. I could perhaps have tried to find out about things.

(Sophie Scholl was one of the group of resistors known as *The White Rose*. She was born in 1920 and executed in 1942.)



This is Layton's poem to Jesus, considered not as the founder of Christianity but as a Jewish moral teacher.

Bright's Wine

It takes
a decent
God-fearing
Canadian
to turn
a lovely grape
into a lousy
wine.

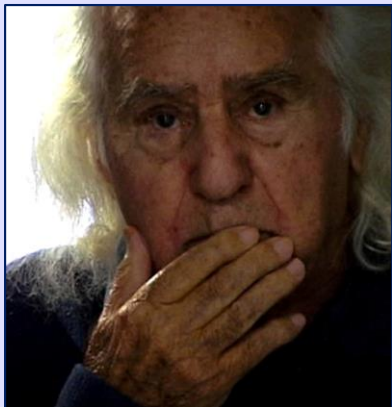


Layton was famous for his short poems.

Pale Dry Select is Bright's best-selling wine. Providing the most alcohol for the price, it is the preferred drink of the homeless alcoholic.

See discussion in

<http://nationalpost.com/life/food/the-pale-dry-truth-to-what-extent-if-any-is-an-alcohol-manufacturer-responsible-for-its-demographic>



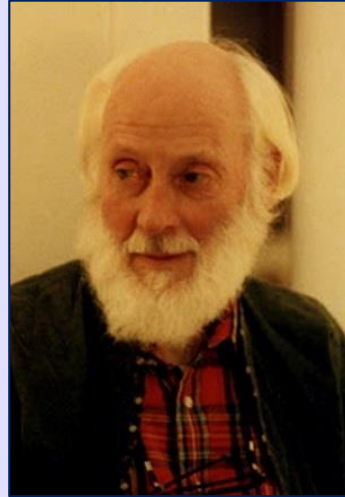
The Silence

It grew from nothing
Inside me it grew
It grew in my veins and arteries
In my bones and flesh
It mastered my blood
One day I found it curled up
In my skull
Under my useless tongue
Now I have nothing to say
To anyone

This poem, written in 1973 when Layton was at the height of his fame, concerns the fact that sometimes the poet cannot find the words to say something. It is a premonition for the Alzheimer's disease with which Layton was afflicted in his old age.

George Johnston (1913-2004)

Born in Hamilton, Johnston studied philosophy and English at Victoria College in Toronto. He served in the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II. After the war he did graduate work at the University of Toronto, and finally became a professor at Carleton University, where he taught Middle and Old English. He published translation of Norse and Faroese poetry as well as his own verse. He considered himself a teacher and a family man who had been lucky enough to write poetry.



Johnston was a modest man who stayed away from fame. It was difficult to find an acceptable photograph of him. He had a large family – three daughters and three sons and many grandchildren.

Cathleen Sweeping

The wind blows, and with a little broom
She sweeps against the cold clumsy sky.
She's three years old. What an enormous room
The world is that she sweeps, making fly
A little busy dust! And here am I
Watching her through the window in the gloom
Of this disconsolate spring morning, my
Thoughts as small and busy as her broom.



The day that would never come

The day that would never come comes, it is
not what was expected, not the dreamed of
gay trip to Montreal and the gay leave
taking on the dock for Europe



The recordings are available on the Canadian Poetry Archives website
<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/poetry/001066-100.01-e.php>



The photograph is from http://www.steveirvine.com/astro/startrails_fireflyvi09.html

Firefly Evening

Heft of earth, under;
evenings heft, thunder;
evening of fireflies;
thunder in western skies.

Airs through windows yet
and through the downstairs let
that over pastures come
thunder from.



Lightning and stars – photograph by Steve Irvine, who lives in Wiarton, Ontario
http://www.steveirvine.com/astro/lightning_stars.html



**Patricia Kathleen Page
(1916-2010)**

Born in England, Page was brought up on the Canadian prairies. She traveled extensively (Brazil, Australia, Mexico) with her diplomat husband, Arthur Irwin, before finally retiring to Victoria, B. C. As well as writing many volumes of poetry, she was also active as a painter (under the name P. K. Irwin). Her poem *Planet Earth*, was selected as part of a United Nations program to foster dialogue among nations, involving readings in countries around the world.

Photograph, 1950s

Traveller's Palm (*Ravenala madagascariensis*)



The Traveler's Palm may be so named because the stems of the leaves direct rainwater into the trunk – this could be drunk by thirsty travelers.



This is part of the *NFB Poets on Film No 2* (1977). Animation is by Joyce Borenstein.
Film can be viewed on the NFB website
https://www.nfb.ca/film/poets_on_film_no_2/



This clip is from a 1990 NFB film directed by Donald Winkler *Still Waters: The Poetry of P. K. Page*. The film can be viewed at
https://www.nfb.ca/film/still_waters/

The Filled Pen

Eager to draw again,
find space in that small room
for my drawing-board and inks

and the huge revolving world
the delicate nib releases.

I have only to fill my pen
and the shifting gears begin:
flywheel and cogwheel
start their small-toothed interlock

and whatever machinery draws
is drawing through my fingers
and the shapes that I have drawn
gaze up into my eyes.
We stare each other down.

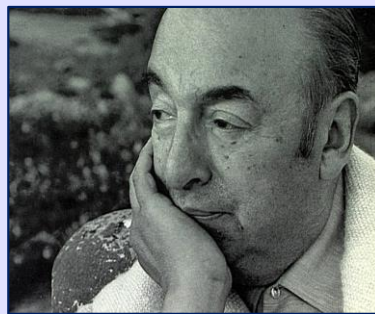
Light of late afternoon —
white wine across my paper —
the subject I would draw.
Light of the stars and sun.

Light of the swan-white moon.
The blazing light of trees.
And the rarely glimpsed bright face
behind the apparency of things.

Oda para Planchar

La poesía es blanca:
sale del agua envuelta en gotas,
se arruga, y se amontona,
hay que extender la piel de este planeta,
hay que planchar el mar de su blancura
y van y van las manos,
se alisan las sagradas superficies
y así se hacen las cosas:
las manos hacen cada día el mundo,
se une el fuego al acero,
llegan el lino, el lienzo y el tocuyo
del combate de las lavanderías
y nace de la luz una paloma:
la castidad regresa de la espuma.

1962



Pablo Neruda
1904-1973



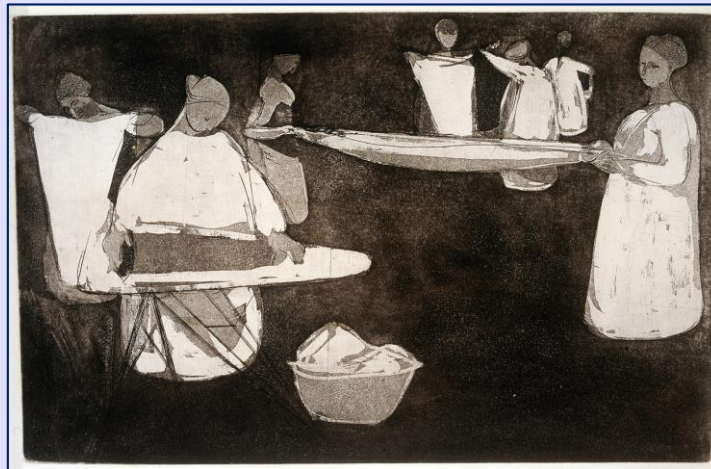
The poem Planet Earth by P. K. Page begins with a quotation from Pablo Neruda.

The reading (of the English translation by Ben Belitt, 1974) is by Hans Ostrom. This is available at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLMXg1-lCas>

Ode on Ironing

Poetry is white:
it comes out of the water covered with drops,
it wrinkles and piles up in heaps.
We must spread out the whole skin of this planet,
iron the white of the ocean:
the hands go on moving,
smoothing the sanctified surfaces,
bringing all things to pass.
Hands fashion each day of the world,
fire is wedded to steel,
the linens, the canvas, coarse cottons, emerge
from the wars of the washerwomen;
a dove is born from the light
and chastity rearises from the foam.



Oda para Planchar, Etching , Roser Bru, 1965

Planet Earth



P. K. Page



It has to be loved the way a laundress loves her linens,
the way she moves her hands caressing the fine muslins
knowing their warp and woof,
like a lover coaxing, or a mother praising.

painting by
P. K. Irwin
1964

Page's poem is a *glosa*, an early Renaissance form that was developed by poets of the Spanish court in the 14th and 15th centuries. This quotes a quatrain from another poet, and uses each of the four lines as the last line for four new stanzas, each generally ten lines long. The usual rhyme scheme of a *glosa* includes final-word rhyming of the 6th, 9th and the borrowed 10th lines.

Page starts *Planet Earth* with a quatrain from Neruda's ode *In Praise of Ironing*. Page has written many other poems in this format using lines from Auden, Rilke, Graves and others as a starting point for her own poetry. Her 2009 book *Coal and Roses* contains 21 glosas.



Earth-Rise
Apollo, 1968

It has to be made bright, the skin of this planet
till it shines in the sun like gold leaf.
Archangels then will attend to its metals
and polish the rods of its rain.
Seraphim will stop singing hosannas
to shower it with blessings and blisses and praises
and, newly in love,
we must draw it and paint it
our pencils and brushes and loving caresses
smoothing the holy surfaces.

**Margaret Avison
(1918-2007)**

Born in Galt, Ontario, the daughter of a Methodist minister, Avison spent her childhood in Regina and Calgary. She was educated at Victoria College in Toronto. She worked as a librarian, teacher and social worker. In 1963 she converted from agnosticism to Christianity. Her poetry is often described as metaphysical.



video is from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4zriL6WrbE&t=23s>

Recitation of the Avison poem is by Zachariah Wells, a Canadian poet.

<https://archive.org/details/TheSwimmersMoment>

<http://www.zachariahwells.com/>

For everyone
The swimmer's moment at the whirlpool comes,
But many at that moment will not say
'This is the whirlpool, then.'
By their refusal they are saved
From the black pit, and also from contesting
The deadly rapids, and emerging in
The mysterious, and more ample, further waters.
And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn
Pale and forever on the rim of suction
They will not recognize.
Of those who dare the knowledge
Many are whirled into the ominous centre
That, gaping vertical, seals up
For them an eternal boon of privacy,
So that we turn away from their defeat
With a despair, not for their deaths, but for
Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret
Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth
Where one or two have won:
(The silver reaches of the estuary).

Al Purdy (1918-2000)

Born near Belleville, at age 3, Purdy went to live with his grandfather, a whisky-drinking remittance man, after his father died. Purdy dropped out of high school, worked at various jobs, served in the Royal Canadian Air Force and finally decided to become a writer in the 50s. He constructed an A-frame house on Roblin Lake in Prince Edward County, Ontario, and made a basic living from his writing. Later, he and his wife Eurithe divided their time between Roblin Lake and North Saanich on Vancouver Island. Purdy became a very popular poet. His poetry was colloquial and often garrulous, his persona gruff and often defiant.

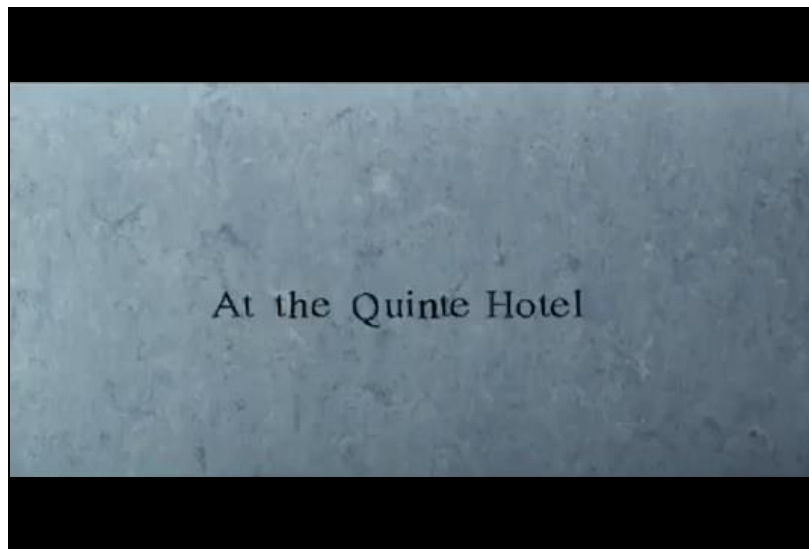


Queen's Park statue, 2008
Edwin and Veronica Dam

Purdy died in 2000. He was suffering from lung cancer and his death was an assisted suicide, before this became legal. See the 2016 Toronto Life article:

<https://torontolife.com/city/life/john-hofsess-assisted-suicide/>

Purdy adored his grandfather who appears in several of his poems. A remittance man is an immigrant supported by payments from the home country (to ensure he did not return).



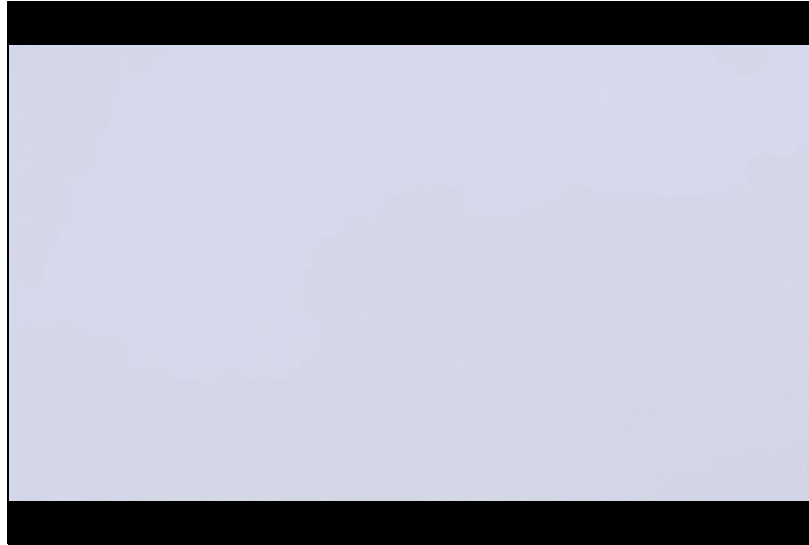
Purdy's most famous poem *At the Quinte Hotel* recounts the experiences of the poet (a sensitive man) in a rough country bar in Ontario.

This is an animated version of the poem by Bruce Alcock (2005). It uses an old 1968 CBC radio recording of the poem by Al Purdy. The video is available at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9em4xNveCw>

Another (much more realistic) version of the poem was made by Gord Downie (of The Tragically Hip) in 2003:


<https://vimeo.com/31806953>




This is a clip from the 2015 documentary *Al Purdy Was Here* directed by Brian Johnson. Leonard Cohen reads Purdy's poem *Necropsy of Love*. The scene shows the cemetery in Ameliasburgh, Ontario, where Al Purdy's ashes are buried. Ameliasburgh is on Roblin Lake in Prince Edward County, south of Belleville. Purdy lived there for many years in an A-frame house that he built. This is now available for writers-in-residence:

<http://www.alpurdy.ca/al-purdy/>

Funeral



The preacher called beforehand
to make sure God
occupied a place in my heart
or somewhere nearby
I made a mistake
told him the truth
said I wasn't religious



This poem concerns the death and burial of Purdy's mother.

The Last Picture in the World

A hunched grey shape
framed by leaves
with lake water behind
standing on our
little point of land
like a small monk
in a green monastery
meditating

Great Blue Heron
Robert Bateman, 1978



almost sculpture
except that it's alive
brooding immobile permanent
for half an hour
a blue heron
and it occurs to me
that if I were to die at this moment
that picture would accompany me
wherever I am going
for part of the way

This is one of Purdy's last poems, written at the time that he was considering assisted dying.



This final illustration is by P. K. Page. The intricate fitting together of the different shapes, textures and colours makes allusion to the writing of poems where words are fit together within the boundaries of form to convey some message to the reader.