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Where the Light Is

Bomb everything. Imagine yourself standing atop a tall mountain that overlooks your hometown, your well-lit, comfortable city that holds your family, friends, and every other thing you cherish in life. Now imagine your city vanishing into a midnight abyss from the most recent wartime blackout. At first, you think nothing of it, coming to see the occurrence of these power outages as quite commonplace, but eventually the view enraptures you, and you suddenly feel like a god in solitude, towering over his shadow of a city. The scene described is exactly what Earle Birney witnesses and exactly what inspires him to write his poem “Vancouver Lights,” where he comments on the bleak future that humanity has waiting ahead if it does not learn from its past mistakes. Birney takes this premonition one step further in his poem “Anglosaxon Street,” where he predicts a world that has exacerbated its degenerative characteristics without ever learning from the error of its ways. Nevertheless, in both poems, specifically written to be orated, Birney speaks from the point-of-view of an epic observer attempting to make humanity cognizant of its own imminent, self-destruction in an effort to prevent it from occurring. However, whereas “Vancouver Lights” references Greco-Roman mythology to express a message of hopefulness and salvation, “Anglosaxon Street” utilizes Anglo-Saxon imagery and terminology to declare a message of hopelessness and futility. Birney’s contrasting styles of communication are important to note because though they both reference repetitions of and comparisons to man’s past failures, the speakers of each poem approach the situation differently, thereby specifically addressing various factions of humanity – the hopeful and the hopeless audiences – and intriguing each of them enough to elicit a call to action.

First, Birney crafts two miniature epics in both “Vancouver Lights” and “Anglosaxon Street,” while having his speakers narrate from the vantage point of a prescient observer. In both poems, Birney’s speakers seem to step back and remove themselves from the fray of an everyday, warring lifestyle in order to observe, chronicle, and derive meaning from its occurrence, viewing the scene as an epic observer. In doing so, the speakers draw from the influences of both historical accounts and poetry – referring to Herodotus’ *Histories* and Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, in the Greco-Roman style, and Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and an anonymous author’s *Beowulf* epic, in the Anglo-Saxon style, – to synthesize compactly the meanings of both and, through doing so, arrive at some new, profound conclusion. The second stanza of “Vancouver Lights” exemplifies this combination when the speaker states that “through the feckless years we have come to the time / when to look on this quilt of lamps is a troubling delight” (lines 10-11), which “Prometheus” (36), the human captor of fire, takes from the hearth of Mount Olympus, the home of the Greco-Roman mythological gods. Continuing with the advancement of man “from Europe’s bog through Africa flowing / and Asia” (12-13), the speaker explains how the sun-god “Phoebus” (22) has become just a “spark beleaguered” (19) because humanity has “conjured these flames” (27) and so the artificial “rays were ours” (32), providing a more reliable, and controllable, source of light. Here, the speaker freely combines both historical references and mythological allusions to call attention to the similarities between our ancient ancestors, our modern contemporaries, and our forthcoming progeny, which only a prescient speaker – who has an firm understanding of people from both past and present time periods – can appropriately compare and predict. Thus, the speaker of “Vancouver Lights” notices that ancient tales of humanity overstepping its boundaries begin to repeat themselves, and he hopes to raise the alarm by bringing them to light. Similarly, in

“Anglosaxon Street,” the speaker watches as “Dawn drizzle end[s]” (1) and points out the “ghetto gotten for goyim” (5) while the “Anglekin / Alongside in lanenooks” (32-3) become “careless of Saxonry / with moonglow and haste” (34-5), thereby crafting an interaction between two chronologically separated peoples. This intertwining of current, racist terminology with ancestral tribes foreshadows the deleterious fate of man with an prescient sense of what is surely to come if we change nothing, basing our predictions off of humanity’s grotesque precedent. Thus, Birney’s speakers showcase a sort of knowledge that remains exclusive to a few: the rare, comparatively astute, and cautionary epic observers.

As these epic observers, Birney’s speakers desire to convey the same lesson that humanity still exists as the collective master of its own fate, even though it may perceive some circumstances as beyond its control. The speaker of “Vancouver Lights,” when specifically referring to the city’s lights, claims ownership of and accountability for what humanity has created, in addition to asserting control over its creation:

These rays were ours
 we made and unmade them Not the shudder of continents
 doused us the moon's passion nor crash of comets
 In the fathomless heat of our dwarfdom our dream's combustion
 we contrived the power the blast that snuffed us
 No one bound Prometheus Himself he chained
 and consumed his own bright liver (32-37)

In these lines, the speaker compares humanity’s act of inventing artificial light to Prometheus’ act of stealing heavenly fire, which beautifully reiterates his previous point that humanity only repeats its history, but that maybe this time around, it can hopefully learn from its predecessors’ actions. By paralleling modern man with the tragic hero Prometheus, the speaker hopes to portray Prometheus’ mythological tale as a cautionary one, because by his own actions, Prometheus angered the gods and drew them out to exact their punishment upon him – as his

being chained to a mountainside was the ramification of a deed performed on his own accord – akin to how humanity’s impending downfall will be self-provoked, should it ever occur. Thus, by alluding to Prometheus’ tale, the speaker hopes to enlighten humanity before it suffers the same self-induced fate as Prometheus, or that of “Aldebaran” (29). According to astronomy, Aldebaran is one of the brightest stars in the nighttime sky, similar to how the industrialized civilizations in our modern world are currently the dominating world powers. However, in other religions influenced by neo-paganism, such as Greco-Roman mythology, Aldebaran is also known as “the wanderer” or “the fallen angel,” which serves as an appropriately foreboding prediction that nicely encapsulates the situation in one concrete symbol. For if we begin to wander from our well-lit path and take our brightness for granted, we will become nothing more than just another fallen angel that has lost control of itself, as the speaker of “Anglosaxon Street” so vividly shows us throughout his poem. If we allow our sense of community simply to be “welded with slogans” claiming that “There’ll Always Be An England” and “V’s for Victory” (10-12), then into the “blank plasterwaste” we cast our control over our lights and, more importantly, our world (2), as those sayings serve no more of a purpose than to “enhance geraniums” and “vanquish the housefly” (11-12), rather than uniting all people into a single community of man. Hence, humanity boldly needs to stand up collectively, fulfill its role as the arbiter of its own destiny, and like Prometheus, hold itself accountable for what it has created.

Accordingly, if we are the masters of our own fates, then we should responsibly heed Birney’s speakers’ warnings of potential disaster and allusions to the use of atomic bomb weaponry in order to avoid causing our own downfall via nuclear fallout. As the speaker of “Vancouver Lights” tries to warn humanity about the dangers of its own unwilling acceptance of responsibility, he hints at what may be the final outcome of our “fragile planet” (19). The

speaker alludes to the “Blast that snuffed us” (35) that would leave our world sitting in “corner emptiness” (20) surrounded by the black, “primal ink” (15) of darkness, a clear reference to nuclear warfare. Though this speaker does not directly address the idea of the atomic bomb, which was only a shadow of creation at the time, he does insinuate that our so called “peace relations” are hanging by pendulous threads that could become quickly severed, and when cut, would ignite a cataclysmic reaction that ends in the “primal ink” of complete darkness, spilled blood, and insufferable carnage. In “Anglosaxon Street,” though, the speaker addresses the problem even more boldly, as just a year later, the thought of the atomic bomb has become more prevalent in the conversations of even the most common man. The speaker even alludes to the Bible to imply his vision of the impending destruction, stating that ignorant people “Sit after supper on smeared doorsteps” (25), remaining unaware of the parables they exemplify by reliving them, as the “supper” could be interpreted as the Last Supper of Jesus Christ before his crucifixion. Along those same lines, the “smeared doorsteps” beg the reader to remember the description of smeared lamb’s blood upon the thresholds of the Israelites’ homes as they ate their “supper” of unleavened bread while the Angel of Death passed over them, carrying out the last of Moses’ prophetic plagues that finally persuaded the Egyptian Pharaoh to free the enslaved Israelites. Birney compares this biblical Angel of Death to the chemical atomic bomb that is crafted of “moonglow and haste” (35), as we hastily build these disastrous weapons without taking all of the extensive cause and effect chains of consequence into account, and once we deploy them, we irrevocably destroy our planet and are left with only the blackened remnants of a supposedly once civilized species and the natural glow of the moon. Worse than that, though, humanity never seems to learn anything from its past mistakes, but only cyclically repeats itself in the forms of “mornstar and worldrise” (37), as another world power ascends until it also

overextends its boundaries, and so it is consequently vanquished by another “mornstar,” another bomb of death. Thus, to avoid any further suffering, we need to listen to our epic observers and act responsibly with our creations, whether they are something as simple as artificial lights or something as destructive as nuclear warheads.

Additionally, the speaker utilizes the interplay between the literal and figurative interpretations of that light and darkness throughout “Vancouver Lights” to compare and contrast the apocalyptic and redemptory symbolism of the two images. The speaker begins describing his surroundings in the poem as a “moonless” night, so dark that the blackness “wraps ocean land air” (1-2), enshrouding the city of Vancouver so much that it seems like nothing more than simply a “spark beleaguered / by darkness” (19-20). But the city remains un-harassed by the night, as its “quilt of lamps” (11) has made a comforting “twinkle” in a “corner of emptiness” (20), and so the “black Experimentress” (21) of night can only hope to offend it while it has its artificial source of light. However, once we are left as powerless as the “bubble” of “Phoebus” that “dries on her slide” (22-23), night is as free as the wealthy “Nubian” to have her way with us, and so she “wears for an evening’s whim a necklace of nebulae” (23-24). These back and forth battles between natural night and artificial light only occur because we, humanity, as the “unique glowworms,” (25) have “from blankness and cold...fashioned stars” (28), or at least our electric versions of them, to mount a defense with “our dream’s combustion” (34) against the invasive “beast in the stretching night” (38). However, though the speaker crudely groups everything sinister and malicious into the category of “Plutonian descent” (38), he also realizes the natural embrace of the night may be the only entity that can protect humanity from itself and its “progress.” For even though “there was light” at the closing of the poem (39), – another biblical allusion to the creation story of the world, as found in the book of Genesis – the speaker

does not want us to “consume” our “own bright liver[s]” (37), and so he also appreciates the restorative qualities of the night. Hence, though the speaker embraces the comfort and reassurance that our artificial lights provide, he also realizes the significance of the natural night, and knows that the darkness may also bring that sense of comfort for those who have become overwhelmed by man’s overbearing light.

Moreover, the various interpretations of these contrasting images highlight the differing opinions of how to solve, or ignore, man’s societal ills, which stem from the speakers’ opposing views on our current human condition. Whereas the speaker of “Vancouver Lights” assumes a tone of hopefulness and salvation about the future, the speaker of “Anglosaxon Street” takes on a tone of hopelessness and futility when attempting to fix humanity’s troubles. In “Vancouver Lights,” the speaker holds fast to the “quilt of lamps” (11) that “we the unique glowworms” (25) crafted, as “These rays were ours / we made and unmade them” (32-33), and so by harboring that power of creation, we can control whether or not we allow ourselves to self-destruct, destroying the rest of the world with us. The speaker continues with “No one bound Prometheus” (36), implying that he chained himself to his fate, and so have we, “Yet we must speak” (25), and rid ourselves of our bondage, because “there was light” (39), and with that light, we can hope to change our world before it no longer exists. Conversely, the speaker of “Anglosaxon Street” sees only “Faded housepatterns hoary and finicky” (3) that “reek only cellarrot / Ottar of carexhaust catcorpse and cookinggrease” (7-8), and so he remains unmoved by the other speaker’s hope for salvation, because all around him, he sees and smells the exact destruction of what he tries to deny. Furthermore, he condemns the “Imperial hearts [that] heave this haven” (9) and the “bleached beldames / festooned with shopping bags...stepping over buttrivers” (13-15) that are just “leaping Commandowise into leprous lanes” (20), for by trying to fix our broken society,

they only seem to exacerbate the situation. To this speaker, the existence of a way to mend our problems is only a myth, as he sees no way to escape the futility of “daylong doughtiness dire handplay / in sewertrench or sandpit” (22-23), other than to “muse in movie” or to “lope to alehall” (28-29) before we force ourselves to go “Home again to hotbox and humid husbandhood” (31) with “moonglow and haste” (35). Overall though, the crucial concept of “mornstar and worldrise” seems to bother this speaker the most (37), for he sees no true means of escape from the cyclical routines of this hateful, human destruction. Thus, the two speakers have largely divergent views about how advanced our world’s ailments are, and therefore narrate their poems with very dissimilar tones, though both serve the similar purpose of calling attention to the ills of our world in hopes of curing them before they become lethal.

And so we arrive at our final destination where Birney’s two speakers leave us: the deciding grounds. In crafting these two poems, Birney hoped to excite some desire for change in his audience, and he assumed two different tones to better accomplish that goal. Though the speakers of both poems speak from an epic observer’s viewpoint and each addresses the idea of humanity’s having control over its own fate by atomically destroying itself or not, the speaker of “Vancouver Lights” uses the interplay of light and darkness to express a message of hopefulness and salvation, whereas the speaker of “Anglosaxon Street” uses the irony of our society’s desire to escape from the ramifications of its own actions to convey a message of hopelessness and futility. Moreover, as stated earlier, Birney intended to read these poems aloud, and so his unconventional spacings served as metrical paces that would better emphasize key phrasings and resound better with both hopeful and hopeless audiences, which would then effect a larger change in their thinking and their desire to do something about our world’s problems. At the same time, I wonder how Birney actually felt about the atomic bombs the United States dropped

during World War II, because though their explosions caused immense suffering for one country, they essentially ended the war, which prevented any further killing or suffering for every other country involved. Nonetheless, whatever Birney's ethical opinion may have been, I am sure that he developed it in the darkness of contemplation atop that mountain overlooking the silhouette of his Vancouver, all the while searching for an answer, searching for where the light is.