

IRVING LAYTON: A CANADIAN POET?

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Irving Layton was born near Neamtz, Roumenia, on 12 March 1912, into a Jewish family. His original name was Israel Lazarovitch, of which he decided to retain only the initials. In 1913 the family moved to Montreal, where Layton lived until 1969, when he moved to Toronto. He completed his studies at McGill University, from which he obtained a master's degree in economics and political science in 1946. His first book of poems, *Here and Now*, appeared in 1945. Since then he has published about fifty volumes of poetry, ten short stories, and more than eighty articles and reviews. Recently he has published a first collection from his voluminous correspondence. In 1983 he decided to return to his "old stumping ground" in Montreal, where his biographer, Elspeth Cameron, leaves him "fallen asleep with his knees up to his chest"(461). (As late as July 1992, Layton, almost eighty and not in good health, was still living in Montreal, well taken care of by Annette Pottier, his young fifth wife.)

To cross abruptly from the artist's biography to his art, here is one of his most famous poems, which appeared in 1954.

The Birth of Tragedy (SP, 15)

And me happiest when I compose poems.
Love, power, the huzza of battle
are something, are much;

yet a poem includes them like a pool
water and reflection.

In me, nature's divided things —
tree, mould on tree —
have their fruition;

I am their core. Let them swap,
bandy, like a flame swerve.

I am their mouth; as a mouth, I serve.

And I observe how the sensual moths
big with odour and sunshine
dart into the perilous shrubbery;
or drop their visiting shadows
upon the garden I one year made
of flowering stone to be a footstool
for the perfect gods,
who, friends to the ascending orders,
sustain all passionate meditations
and call down pardons
for the insurgent blood.

A quiet madman, never far from tears,
I lie like a slain thing
under the green air the trees
inhabit, or rest upon a chair
towards which the inflammable air
tumbles on many robins' wings;
noting how seasonably
leaf and blossom uncurl
and living things arrange their death,
while someone from afar off
blows birthday candles for the world.

This often anthologized poem exhibits some typical marks of its author. The presence of Nietzsche, obvious in the title and clearly perceptible throughout the poem in the speaker's affirmative attitude to life including death, must be pointed out from the start, for far from being incidental this is in Layton's poetry a constant fact which can be taken as a key to the whole of his poetic work. (We shall return to this point.) Along and together with the Nietzschean attitude what also must be noticed is the central position of the I-speaker which, quite understandably, is usually taken to be "boisterous" Irving Layton himself rather than a Nietzschean mask, a fact that has prevented many Canadian readers from enjoying or continuing to enjoy this poet's work. A third aspect to observe in this metapoem is the Romantic nature of its poetics: not so much because of the poet presented as "A quiet madman, never far from tears", as because of the social function of the poet as the namer who gives meaning to the world and interprets it for his fellow men—a well known figure much advertised by Emerson and Whitman. As early as 1955 one of the most outstanding among the Canadian critics, George Woodcock, who would always point out Layton's Romantic qualities, classified his poetry as "pseudo-Whitmanesque" and the poet as "a self-conscious shocker"(40).

George Woodcock at the beginning of the poet's career took a stand against him and, in spite of "The Birth of Tragedy" and a few other poems generally considered excellent ("The Swimmer" (*SP*, 16) and "Song for Naomi" (*SP*, 38) for example), he declared: "Layton is negligible as a poet"(40). What apparently prevented any possibility of a favorable appreciation on this critic's part was the presence among others of some poems he considered in very bad taste. Even from his revised position expressed in a lengthy essay eleven years later, Woodcock couldn't help pointing out that "Layton is capable of some extraordinary lapses into mere triteness and triviality"(157). To support this point, he quoted the following satirical vignette:

Defence Enough (CP, 84)

To guard her virtue
this woman
resorts
to needless stratagems
and evasions.
She doesn't
realize
her face
is ample
defence.

An intriguing coincidence: one year before Woodcock told his fellow countrymen about the negligibility of Layton's poetry, a famous American poet came across his obscure Canadian colleague's work; two years later he published "A Note on Layton" starting as follows:

"What else are you going to say about a man whose work you whole-heartedly admire than that he is a good poet? If you consider yourself a critic of poetry, which I do, all the more reason for speaking with all the force you can command in his support. You would be a fool to do less.
When I first clapped eyes on the poems of Irving Layton, two years ago, I let out a cry of joy. He was bawdy but that wasn't why I gave him my recognition. But for the way he greeted the world he was celebrating, head up, eyes propped wide, his gaze roving round a wide perimeter — which merely happened to see some sights that had never been disclosed to me so nakedly or so well" (5).

The note, which was signed by William Carlos Williams, went on praising the poet's passionate, "luxurious freedom"; his "unchecked"

poetry; his laughter “from the belly”; his “unrivaled choice of words [...] and unusual vocabulary and the ability to use it”; the fact that he “despises Canada (being Canadian), and loves and would give his life for it”; and the fact that he “has written profusely, pouring out his verses without check [...] which is the way to write”. Williams’ commendatory note ends on a high, prophetic key: “I believe this poet to be capable, to be capable of anything. [...] There will, if I am not mistaken, be a battle: Layton against the rest of the world. With his vigour and abilities who shall not say that Canada will not have produced one of the west’s most famous poets?” (5-6)

After so much praise we seem to need another taste of Layton’s poetry. We may take a 1953 poem and rightly presume that Williams had read it and might have had it in his mind while writing his note.

Vexata Quaestio (SP, 17)

I fixing my eyes upon a tree
Maccabean among the dwarfed
Stalks of summer
Listened for ship’s sound and birdsong
And felt the bites of insects
Expiring in my arms’ airs.

And there among the green prayerful birds
Among the corn I heard
The chaffering blades:
“You are no flydung on cherry blossoms,
Among two-legged lice
You have the gift of praise.

Give your stripped body to the sun
Your sex to any skilled
And pretty damsel;
From the bonfire

Of your guilts make
A blazing Greek sun."

Then the wind which all day
Had run regattas through the fields
Grew chill, became
A tree-dimantling wind;
The sun went down
And called my brown skin in.

This poem presents a Nietzschean celebration of life, here and often elsewhere in Layton symbolized by the sun; the typical Romantic picture of the poet alone with nature; the shockingly worded realism reproducing the somehow biblical poet-prophet call; the presence of the insects, another constant in Layton; the free verse showing his preference for the variable rhetorical flow over the effects of fixed stanzaic forms and rhyme schemes; the theme of the social function of the poet who among his lesser fellow men has a liberating power, being able to transform a bonfire of guilts into into "A blazing Greek sun".

Both "The Birth of Tragedy" and "Vexata Quaestio" deal with the theme of poetry itself, as do some other poems among the most famous ones by Irving Layton, whom the Canadian poet and critic Eli Mandel classified as a "superb theorist of poetry" (6). But of course his themes are many, a fact made evident through a simple glance at some titles of his published poems, "approximately one thousand" according to Elspeth Cameron (453). Among them you often see people's names — including relatives, fellow poets, public figures—, names of places, names of animals, and religious references, mainly to Christianity— which he reapproaches—and to Judaism—which he defends. Unfortunately in the space of a magazine article one cannot reproduce many poems—and the reproduction of his/her poems are obviously the best way to introduce a poet. Therefore, lets us quickly move to a composition which is "not only one of Layton's best poems" but also

“one of the most moving poems of our generation”, in the mind of George Woodcock (171).

The Bull Calf (*SP*, 40-1)

The thing could hardly stand. Yet taken
from his mother and the barn smells
he still impressed with his pride,
with the promise of sovereignty in the way
his head moved to take us in.
The fierce sunlight tugging the maize from the ground
licked at his shapely flanks.
He was too young for all that pride.
I thought of the deposed Richard II.

“No money in bull calves,” Freeman had said.
The visiting clergyman rubbed his nostrils
now snuffing pathetically at the windless day.
“A pity,” he sighed.
My gaze slipped off his hat towards the empty sky
that circled over the black knott of men,
over us and the calf waiting for the blow.

Struck,
the bull calf drew in his forelegs
as if gathering strength for a mad rush...
tottered ... raised his darkening eyes to us,
and I saw we were at the far end
of his frightened look, growing smaller and smaller
till we were only the ponderous mallet
that flicked his bleeding ear
and pushed him over on his side, stiffy,
like a block of wood.

Below the hill's crest
 the river snuffled on the improvised beach.
 We dug a deep pit and threw the dead calf into it.
 It made a wet sound, a sepulchral gurgle,
 as the warm sides bulged and flattened.
 Settled, the bull calf lay as if asleep,
 one foreleg over the other,
 bereft of pride and so beautiful now,
 without movement, perfectly still in the cold pit.
 I turned away and wept

To my mind, the theme of this poem is the tragic loss of life brought about by Freeman's merciless law which decrees the survival of the economically fittest. Facing such law the clergyman is powerless and the child's gaze finds an empty sky covering the whole scene. But what makes this "one of the most moving poems of our generation", if we are to accept such opinion, is the witnessing of a killing. In a century of numberless innocent victims killed for various reasons at the bottom of which economic factors can always be detected, we sometimes discover in the eyes of an animal victim what we would hardly have the courage to look at in the eyes of a human victim.

"The Bull Calf" like many other poems by Layton achieves an immediate emotional response from the reader who gains an insight into the terror of life destruction through the contemplation of details of an otherwise meaningless event. This immediate response accounts, I believe, for much of the poet's popularity. And here we may also point out that Romantic Layton, "A quiet madman, never far from tears", stood poles apart from the doctrine of the still ruling poet of the fifties, T. S. Eliot, in whom he saw "a zeal for poetry without zest, / without marrow juices; / at best, a single hair / from the beard of Dostoiesvsky" (*CP*, 73).

To do justice to T. S. Eliot, who always advocated an anti-romantic attitude to poetry describing the creation of a poem as an intellectual and almost scientific activity, we might question some details in "The Bull Calf" which seem to go against common experience, if observed "scientifically". Too soon the dead animal becomes "stiffy, / like a block of wood." And too soon after this, we are told that "the warm sides bulged and flattened." There is certainly more emotion than scientific logic in some of Layton's poems.

His direct attack against T. S. Eliot, whose name is spelled out in the quoted poem's title, is typical of Layton. In his *Collected Poems* we find similar attacks against Canadian colleagues as, for example, in "Mexico As Seen by the Reverend Dudek" (326-27), in "F. R. Scott" (329-30), and in "Keewaydin Poetry Festival" (115-16). The last piece is a satire in which we read the names of Frank Scott, Dudek, and Currie, forming with other poets left unnamed "a congregation of sick egotists".

Egotism is the first accusation Layton makes against the standard figure of a poet: in "Two Poets in Toronto" (*CP*, 73-4) he tells the story of a couple of poets who entered the city at the closing of a Christmas parade "and thought the hosannas, / the plaudits of the crowd / were intended for them". The satire goes on telling that "The poets acknowledged / the welcoming noise / and wiped the tears / from their sensitive eyes", while cursing the clown in front "so inglorious / 'ly stealing / with the frisk of a limb / the civic ovation / planned for them".

A second accusation, more insistently repeated, is the lack of passion which Layton identified in the poetry of the fifties. He knows beyond any doubt who is responsible for this state of affairs. The first stanza of "The Modern Poet" (*CP*, 147-48) reads:

Since Eliot set the fashion,
Our poets grow tame;
They are quite without passion,
They live without blame

Like a respectable dame.

The same accusation, though in almost Freudian terms, appears in the short satire "Gathering of Poets" (*CP*, 119):

Repression is here, and so much failure.
 And so much suffering. Each one accompanying death
 With mincing steps, with horrible gestures.
 And their poems? The pepperminting of bad breath.

The remedy against this sickly poetry is a Nietzschean struggle for survival. In his "Advice for Two Young Poets" (*CP*, 179) Layton rejects the example given by Mayakovsky, "who played Russian roulette / with his genius", and urges the young poets to "Learn from Boris, a fox if ever there was one, / outliving Stalin and the other brutes". In order to survive, the poet must be ready to steal and—"if there is no help for it"—to kill, considering that "One miserable human more or less hardly matters / but the loss of a good poem does, / being irreplaceable." And to reinforce his argument he avows that he himself has acted on this survival principle: "God knows how many corpses / I have rotting neatly in my cellar. / I gave up counting long ago."

We obviously suppose that the survival Layton is interested in is the survival of the poet and his poetry. To survive, he fought many battles, often changing positions specially in politics: a communist in the forties, who consequently was not allowed to enter the United States for many years, he ended up attacking Fidel Castro and supporting Lindon Johnson and the Vieteman War. And to survive, he used many weapeons: poems, prefaces to his books of poetry, letters, and newspaper articles. A selection of these articles, together with his M. A. thesis—"Harold Laski: The Paradoxes of a Liberal Marxist, 1946", were published in his prose collection *Taking Sides*. This book might be of interest because it allows the reader to observe Layton defending

pure Marxism in his thesis and, nineteen years later, advocating American ideals as, for example, in "U. S. Effort In Vietnam And Its Scope Justified By Mounting External Threat" (102-04). One is almost tempted to conclude that survival for Layton means also notoriety—even at the price of scandal.

To scandalize he often used crude subject matter, dealing with it in a fine way at his best and in a crude way at his worst. The distinction between "crude/fine" and "crude/crude" is made by W. J. Keith, who dedicated four of the almost three hundred pages of his excellent *Canadian Literature in English* to the presentation of Irving Layton, whom he considers "clearly the pre-eminent poetic figure during this period" (1940-70). According to Keith, "some of his [Layton's] most brilliant effects arise out of a supreme expression of crude subject-matter that is no longer crude when he has transformed it by means of his art" (93). As an example of this Keith mentions "O. E. B." (formerly entitled "Imperial" - *CP*, 72).

How delicately
the Englishwoman
scratches her rectum

Firmly, yet gently,
and with what a regard
for the decencies

Centuries
of imperial rule
inform that touch.

As an example of a "crude/crude" poem (Keith does not mention any) we may take "Bicycle Pump" (*CP*, 321):

The idle gods for laughs gave man his rump;
In sport, so made his kind that when he sighs

In ecstasy between a woman's thighs
 He goes up down, a bicycle pump;
 And his beloved once his seed is sown
 Swells like a faulty tube on one side blown.

Sex has most often been used as a weapon in Layton's struggle for survival. He knows how strongly the subject appeals to the public, and his notion has been reinforced at every public performance ("fifty-five readings and public lectures" in about ten months, Elspeth Cameron informs us, 446): the roaring laughter seems to encourage him to try even harder.

But the best of Layton is not necessarily either "crude/crude" or "crude/fine". It is often "fine/fine": fine human experience in a very fine expression, as we can see in some of his best poems celebrating women close to him: his mother—Keine Lazarovitch: 1870-1959" (*SP*, 80), his first wife—"Berry Picking" (*SP*, 78), and his first daughter, for whom he wrote his perhaps most delicate lyric—"Song for Naomi" (*SP*, 38).

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?

Who is that in the tall grasses running
 Beside her, near the water?
 She can not see there
 Time that pursued her
 In the deep grasses so fast
 And faster

And caught her,
My foolish daughter.

What is the wind in the fair grass saying
Like a verse, near the water?
Saviours that over
All things have power
Make time himself grow kind
And kinder
That sought her,
My little daughter.

Who is that at the close of the summer
Near the deep lake? Who wrought her
Comely and slender?
Time but attends and befriends her
Than whom the grasses though tall
Are not taller,
My daughter,
My gentle daughter.

A successful poet from the end of the fifties, it was only in 1966 that Irving Layton could read the first overall interpretation of his poetic work. It appeared in the spring issue of *Canadian Literature* and it was signed by George Woodcock. The critic remarks from the start that there are "thirty-odd first-rate poems" among the 385 pieces in Layton's *Collected Poems* (257). Having read the anthology during a long journey through Asia and Europe, he concluded that "Many writers are best read out of their own setting". In the case of Layton, the journey had had a favorable effect: that of shutting off the "public self" of a poet who is also "a rather boring showman" (156). (With this clever introduction, Woodcock is able to get away without feeling the necessity to publicly acknowledge that Irving Layton, the Canadian poet who

had been highly praised by William Carlos Williams, was after all the same writer that he had formerly declared “negligible as a poet”.)

After remarking that Layton “is one of those half-fortunate writers who have a way with words and phrases, an almost fatal ability to make a statement on any subject in a heightened rhetorical manner”; and that his work “varies so remarkably from the atrocious to the excellent, and which shows a failure of self-evaluation as monstrous as that of D. H. Lawrence;” the critic declares that “To grasp Layton is rather like trying to grasp Proteus. But Proteus was grasped and so must Layton be, for behind the many disguises an exceptionally fine poet lurks in hiding” (158).

Woodcock points out three main aspects in Layton’s poetry: 1. his “essential neo-romanticism”, which allows him to be “the prophet, the philosopher, the leader of thought”, while assuming also an “anti-literary” and “anti-academic” stance and a “Saint Sebastian attitude” (159-162); 2. his similarity with Picasso, who “connotes enormous energy, and a flexible craftsmanship”, and about whom “there has always been a touch of the clown” in the sense that he “enjoys mystifying his more naïve admirers, and many of his works must be regarded as mere *jeux d’esprit* carried out to amuse himself and fox his public” (163-164); 3. his “tragic view” of Man, “the creature whose own flaws destroy him”: the ideals of “sanity and love” take Layton to “the radical’s disillusionment”; the world is a place of victims, with whom he becomes identified, “particularly those innocents of the animal world” (170-171).

Ten years after Woodcock’s study, Wynne Francis published her “Layton and Nietzsche”, which in my opinion offers a more satisfactory overall interpretation of the poet’s work. Departing from the fact that “Layton has never made any secret of his debt to Nietzsche” (272) and that the impact of the philosopher on the poet in the fifties “clarified Layton’s vision, brought it suddenly into sharp focus”(273), Francis seems in a hurry to remark that “A recognition of the basic Nietzschean thrust of Layton’s work should not lead to reductive conclusions about

his talent. As a poet he owes no more to Nietzsche than T. S. Eliot does to Christianity" (275).

From among the Nietzschean notions that Wynne Francis identifies in Layton we may select the most significant ones. First, the nature and function of art—"Whatever Else Poetry is Freedom" (*SP*, 65-6)—having the sun as a central symbol (274); second, the inextricable relation of joy and suffering in both life and art (175); third, the importance of fair illusion, Apollo's gift which brings redemption against the dark, terrifying powers of Dionysus, which is reality, the abyss of chaos (276); fourth, most important of all, the affirmative attitude of the *ubermensch*, always against "passive suffering", always for "creative sufferers" (282). Francis ends up saying that "A true Dionysian is on his own: he must assert his joy in his own individual existence with all that that entails of cosmic dialectics, history, heredity, environment and personal attributes"—making up "a combination of sources unique to him" (286). From the many poems that express this attitude, we may select the following as an example:

There Were No Signs (*SP*, 94)

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 weaved directness.

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

Another step
And I shall be where I started from.

Before coming to an end, we should consider one more question: Is Irving Layton a Canadian poet? Although it may sound somehow surprising to us, this question has been asked several times before. Seymour Mayne points out that "Paradoxically, ... it is the non-Canadian critics who provide more appreciative reviews of Layton's writings, and who greet his books with more generous praise and acceptance" (9). Such fact is hardly paradoxical if we bear in mind that Layton was born into a Roumanian Jewish family, and as a writer he made many enemies in Canada, a country he felt free to criticize in verse (See, for example, the poems "From Colony to Nation" (*SP*, 55), "Family Portrait" (*SP*, 75), "Centennial Ode" (*SP*, 121)) and in prose: "Canadians haven't changed all that much Still basically Christian, conservative, and castratory; small apple, Presbyterian and philistine, Canadians are taxpayers more concerned with getting to the top of the shitpile than with having a just society" (Forward to *Droppings from Heaven*, 12), and when asked what had made him stay in Canada to write, Layton's answer was "Where else would I find so many stupid people to attack?" (*Taking Sides*, 187).

This sort of acrid language could do anything but prepare a unanimous warm reception to his work in Canada. He succeeded, however, in promoting a cultural change. Elspeth Cameron remarks that "by asserting in his own lower-class voice, that there could beauty, power and majesty in vulgarity, Layton had played a crucial role in transforming Canadian criteria" (404). This was quite an achievement for a man who had declared, in a letter to a friend, that his whole aim and purpose was "to upset the canons of good taste" (Elspeth Cameron, 360). Cameron has a second important remark to make. She suggests that Layton developed "a unique type of poetry". Maintaining his inconsistent theories, drawing from the florid, formal British tradition

and from the more colloquial, free-form American one, he produced “a poetry entirely representative of Canada’s ambivalent position as an extension of Britain and a satellite of the the United States” (296).

The question whether he is a Canadian poet or not was also answered by Layton himself. Writing in 1965 he declared that “The Canadian identity is something that the poet or novelist is not very interested in.” But a few lines later he added : “I would say that I couldn't have written poems I have written unless I was living in Montreal and unless I had the particular environment I did have” (*Taking Sides*, 182).

Perhaps the logical way to understand Irving Layton is to see him as a Nietzschean Canadian poet, full of self-confidence and freedom to affirm with pleasure the pleasure and displeasure he finds around him, always true to the role of

The Tragic Poet (CP, 301-02)

He affirmed life.

He affirmed it
as though it were an extraordinary
rock melon, ripe,
and his discovery.

And with yelps of gladness
he affirmed the brave toilers;
he affirmed the martyrs
whose burning flesh
sizzled hosannahs.

In despair
of ever equalling the courage
he had himself endowed them with

he stepped thoughtfully
before a chauffeur-driven car.

To the end
he praised the beautiful courage
of workers and martyrs,
and expiring at the finish
of a long siren screech
did as he had lived

affirming life.

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