

# "BRIEF ARE THE DAYS OF BEAUTY"

*The Wisdom of Irving Layton's  
"The Gucci Bag"*

*Joseph Kertes*

I  
N THE ORIGINAL FOREWORD TO *The Gucci Bag* (published by Mosaic Press) Irving Layton remarked that this could "quite possibly" be his "last volume of poems." Though the comment has since been withdrawn from the McClelland and Stewart edition — no doubt because another collection must be well under way — there remains a prevailing sense of finality here — of the kind many readers have found in W. B. Yeats's *Last Poems*. It is difficult to define the tone; the subject matter that concerns Layton in this volume has pre-occupied him from the beginning. But one of its characteristics is the inability to idealize any longer. In "Youth and Age 1981"<sup>1</sup> he writes, "One does not dream with eyes open." Another is to see life's antinomies not as an intellectual abstraction but as an intrinsic facet of experience: "pain," he writes in "Bonded," the third poem in the volume, is "pleasure's indis severable twin." The observation may sound Nietzschean, and Wynne Francis has taken some pains to point out the philosopher's influence on Layton's previous work,<sup>2</sup> but the context of the poem is more significant here than ever before.

Layton has presented *The Gucci Bag* as a series of numbered poems; their titles can be found only at the back of the volume, as if they were parenthetical. We are being invited to think of this book as a sustained poetic treatment of related themes, and the structure is not artificial or superimposed. Layton has concinnated these poems because his experience of growing old, of losing true love, of recognizing the potential power of his verse seems to have occurred all at once in his life. The coupling of pain and pleasure is as heartfelt and suddenly overwhelming as Yeats's "tragic joy" in "The Gyres."

In the poem that precedes "Bonded," entitled "Of One Fairy and Three Goddesses,"<sup>3</sup> the poet-lover is unexpectedly plucked from his Edenic garden, where stroll the goddesses of "Ecstasy and Freedom and Love," where, with "rapturous sighs," "we sowed gardens, we builded a house":

We might have died from an excess  
of so much happiness  
but a faery who dwells in the Black Forest  
divined the peril in our bliss.

She pointed her magical stick  
at my head and turned it to old snow.  
I still adore your brooding eyes, Love,  
but where did the goddesses go?

The ability to divine “the peril” in “bliss” is precisely what makes the wisdom of the poet so impressive and the vision so coherent because it repeatedly sets in motion the process of self-discovery. The poetry throughout is replete with images of transformation from innocence, through disillusion, to wisdom. The process, though, is frequently painful, as it is in “Blind Man’s Bluff”:

The long dark September nights are come,  
reminding the vacant poet of losses;  
there are no stars in his skull,  
only blackness, the fumes of dead loves.

The poet’s wisdom is especially evident when we recognize that among the most painful and nihilistic poems concerning solitude and love lost are poems that caution us to consider pain merely as a *part* of experience. In “The Captive” we are told that “A failed love has disordered my sight.” Order is restored when a particular experience is viewed from the perspective of universal experience. “Solitary / as that lightning-blasted birch,” Layton writes in “New Shining Worlds,”

I take comfort from leaves  
falling  
They tell me nothing  
                                endures forever  
neither civilizations  
nor a woman’s malice  
Denuding the thicket  
leaf by leaf  
decay and the punishing minutes  
this day  
gladden my heart with promise  
Only from rot  
are new shining worlds begot

The parting quatrain of *The Gucci Bag* affirms this roundness of vision. If we dwell upon sorrow, the poet warns, it will consume us:

He who to himself a grief does bind  
Learns to dispraise all mankind  
But he who speeds the grief as it flies  
Keeps a candid love in his eyes.

Moreover, other artists are remembered for their ability to balance pleasure and pain in their lives and work. "Whipping you / with epiphanies welts alone can yield," he writes of August Strindberg, "Hecate lashed you on to greatness. / Now men live more sanely for your madness." They were "Ecstasies you suffered / till suffering became your ecstasy. . . ." Boris Pasternak, similarly, is depicted being pulled in opposite directions:

Apartments of your own divided mind,  
you craved to have at once passion and order,  
adventure and security; the sure bridge  
spanning the terrifying chasm below.  
Contrary winds turned you like a weathercock.

His affliction consisted of a "terrible need to suffer and to please."

However, having recognized and recorded the presence of life's "indisseverable twins," the poet rarely adopts a defeatist attitude. It is true and sad, as he writes in "Odd Obsession," that "brief are the days of beauty" and "cruel and fleeting the loves they inspire," but "If you live long enough," he says in another poem, "the differences cancel out."

The wise and aging poet's sense of calm and reconciliation is nothing short of pervasive in this volume. The best example is the poem to Louis Dudek, a one-time friend with whom Layton had a falling out more than twenty years ago. The poem is called "With Undiminished Fire":

Louis, what the hell!  
Let's bury the hatchet  
(and this time not  
in each other's neck or skull).

The conciliatory attitude is not affected. The poet realizes that differences of ideology do not justify rivalry and hatred:

We've gone our separate ways  
to Valhalla — so what?  
We still keep our rage  
for bourgeois and huckster,  
still scorn the fashionable lies  
of pulpit and marketplace;  
still keep faith with Homer and Shakespeare,  
John Donne and Yeats.

The invocation, clearly, is from one old friend to another:

My left ear partly deaf,

I only half-heard your diatribes  
 and literary abuse,  
 the gossip seething in the streets  
 that malice grows from grin to crooked grin.  
 I hope, Louis, you were similarly afflicted  
 and only half-heard mine.

.....

Dear friend, dear comrade-in-arms,  
 in the darker nights ahead  
 which the revolving sun  
 relentlessly spins for both of us  
 let us forgive utterly  
 the long, divisive years, the pain  
 and may each in his separate sky  
 with undiminished fire, shine.

If there is irony in these last lines, I am certain it is unconscious, but they pose an almost diabolical question: which celestial body is Dudek? The sun or moon?

Reconciliation for Layton, though, should not be mistaken for a compromise of artistic integrity. He is no less distressed than ever by avarice and covetousness, and he tells us so in the foreword:

At present the Gucci bag is nailed to my outside housewall to keep away the vampires of materialism and acquisitiveness. A talisman, it also serves as a constant reminder of how easy it is to slide into the inferno of lovelessness, pride and greed, and of the bloated soulless faces one encounters there. Every poet discovers — uncovers — his own hell. Is perhaps inevitably constrained to make it. Mine is the bourgeois world with its contempt for the claims of beauty, justice, truth, and compassion.

Layton's abhorrence of bourgeois values is not new. Many of his earlier poems — "Family Portrait," for instance — contain scathing descriptions of people whose greed has paid great dividends:

That owner of duplexes  
 has enough gold to sink himself  
 on a battleship. His children,  
 two sons and a daughter, are variations  
 on the original gleam: that is,  
 slobs with a college education.<sup>4</sup>

However, in the context of *The Gucci Bag*, with its spirit of forgiveness, poems about the greedy and insensitive seem all the more poignant. There are some people Layton will justifiably never forgive. Among them a lawyer, who is really "an immaculately dressed / dung beetle,"

Revelling  
 in everyone's bourgeois shit

LAYTON

and straining . . . straining hard  
to leave his rank and name  
lying on top of it.

In “Fill in the Blank” Layton — bitter as he must have been after his latest divorce proceedings — cannot resist generalities. The obvious “blank” is filled by still more lawyers, who are described here as “poor bastards / looking for a buck,” as “minions of the rich, / paid to tighten the blindfold / on the eyes of Justice,” and — Layton rarely minces words — as “trained liars.” They belong to a class Layton, in another poem, calls “Dead Souls”:

A decaying body reeks to heaven  
but souls that corrupt smell worse, far worse.  
A dead soul takes sweetness from the air,  
on life itself lays down its black curse.

And add to the lawyers the Canadian establishment at large who seem consistently to put the poet in a frame of mind that is neither lyrical nor subtle. “When they weren’t killing off Indians / for their furs and territory,” he writes in “Whitehern,”

or corrupting senators and councilmen  
or making money off brains more inventive  
than their own, the Canadian bourgeois  
filtered their piety and wealth  
into endowments for church choirs, libraries  
and hospitals; sure of the place they deserved  
on this sinful earth and of the golden  
Edwardian chair waiting for them in heaven.

In the very first poem of the collection, “The Talisman,” we are introduced to the bourgeois symbol, the Gucci bag, which “calls to mind / evil is not external but within.” The last poem admonishes us not to dwell on evil. Between these two, then, we are treated to the gamut of human actions and emotions. Among the basest of humans — the insensitive, the hypocritical, the greedy, the pious — are *some* women. I emphasize “some” because it is only in their most pernicious attitudes that humans — among them women — are able to evoke the most cynical voice the poet can muster. “Sex Appeal” is worth quoting in its entirety:

When the white-haired poet in despair  
turns away from the mindless noise, from  
the twitching figures;  
and apocalyptic images  
of well-dressed men feasting on babyflesh  
leap into his head  
he thinks happily of the neutron bomb,  
his face taking on again  
the proud and serene look

that once brought women in their hundreds  
clamouring to his bed

There is something in power, something in the ability to destroy, that appeals to the darker side of the human psyche. In this case sex appeal is enhanced by a “proud and serene look” behind which is the destruction of the species. Another poem, “Aristocrats,” features Rosa, a prostitute “who does not answer,” while all the other girls “jump from their stools / when the Neopolitans point at them.” What brings Rosa to her feet is a “young Mafioso”:

Sensing he’s different from the others  
and knows his worth,  
knows he has the sharpest knife  
in the city  
and two Alsatians that love him.

Prompted by fear and motivated by power, Rosa succumbs to the only man capable of destroying her. His dogs are his “aristocrats.”

To read these two poems out of context, though, and thereby to suggest that they reveal Layton’s attitude to women would be akin to suggesting that Iago embodies Shakespeare’s attitude to humanity. *The Gucci Bag* is masterful precisely because it is an attempt to record the *range* of human experience. Evil makes the poet nihilistic. Benevolence and love make him exuberant:

Imagination with an eyeblink  
wipes out space and time  
but manifests that narrow place

Where love still grows  
like the first violet of spring  
and its shy prevailing glow.

Similarly, the Jews, who occupy a central place in Layton’s work as a whole and in this collection in particular, are located on a spectrum at whose brightest end are the visionaries — the poets and prophets — and at whose darkest end are the sinners — those for whom vision is meaningless or event threatening. It is difficult to itemize Layton’s theology precisely, but moral conduct is infinitely preferable to mindless observance of religious ritual. His injunction to the Jews is not unlike Isaiah’s:

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. (Isaiah, 1.11)

Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. (1.13)

Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine

eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord. . . . (1.116-118)

In "A Brief History of the Jews" Layton seems almost to be addressing these same people "in their plush synagogues," who are now "talking only to themselves." "The Remnant" describes the kind of Jew who has wandered too far from Mount Sinai. In him the "Xian"<sup>5</sup> has found a counterpart, called the "Idd."

How did it happen  
the noisome Idd usurps his place to become  
a universal scandal and reproach? What  
malignity put him at the head of governments,  
insurance companies and corporations?  
In hot pursuit of power and success are not  
the affluent moneytheists of Old Forest Hill  
an evil deformity, the Israelites' shed skin?  
Their stylish wives and daughters ogling  
the latest shipment of baubles in Miami and Tel Aviv,  
lice in the beards of Moses and the prophets?

The gift/curse that has been bestowed upon the Jews is *rochmonis*<sup>6</sup> (compassion) — if only because they knew too well the kind of life they have led in environments devoid of it. Since *rochmonis* is at the heart of both good conduct and vision, the peculiar lot of the Jew, for Layton, is that he use his spirit to guide the world. The problem is that he has begun to turn a deaf ear to the voice of the prophets: "the voice exhorting them / to stand alone and be a light to the gentiles / is not heard."

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HE BALANCE FOR THESE VITUPERATIVE POEMS is provided in *The Gucci Bag* by expressions of almost boyish wonder and vulnerability. In "Samantha Clara Layton," which is a celebration of the birth of the poet's daughter, there occurs a remarkably subtle transference of fragility and innocence from the newborn to the poet:

Into the ordinary day you came,  
giving your small nose and chin to the air  
and blinded by the noise you could not see.  
Your mother's smile was your benediction;  
my wonderment will accompany you  
all your days. Dear little girl, what blessings  
shall I ask for you? Strong limbs, a mind firm  
that looking on this world without dismay  
turns furious lust into love's romance?

These, my child, and more. Grace keep you  
 queenly and kind, a comfort to the ill and poor,  
 your presence a bounty of joy to all  
 that have vision of you, as I have now  
 who hold your fingers in my trembling hand.

The humility Layton feels in the face of new life is matched only by the futility he feels in the face of death. The poem for Malka Cohen, "To Make an End," is reminiscent of "Keine Lazarovitch: 1870-1959," Layton's most masterful elegy, in that it too reminds us that vitality, fertility, and creativity are as ephemeral as life itself:

The last indignities are over:  
 the bar between convulsing jaws;  
 gaunt cheeks, death's familiar foxholes,  
 and breasts that once gave suck,  
 now flat and unresponsive as damp rags;  
 her diminutive teats, raw and wornout,  
 mocking our vaporous presence on earth  
 with the mordant emphasis of quotemarks.

The difference between this poem and "Keine Lazarovitch," though, is that, here, Malka Cohen leaves behind "the hopeless, homeless love / of her weeping daughters," whose sorrow — genuine though it is — is as transitory as their lives. But Keine Lazarovitch leaves behind a poet to immortalize her. This reading of the later elegy is not meant to be a cynical one. Clearly, the poet intended his lament to be genuine and, certainly, it is not only the grief of the daughters that remains, but also *this poem* to record it; but the earlier poem links its dying figure inextricably to the natural cycle and yet tells of grief and love that are so fundamental to experience that they provide their subject with the possibility of transcendence. Death is no match for the poet's mother:

. . . I believe  
 She endlessly praised her black eyebrows, their thick weave,  
 Till plagiarizing Death leaned down and took them for his  
 mould.

And spoiled a dignity I shall not again find,  
 And the fury of her stubborn limited mind:  
 Now none will shake her amber beads and call God blind,  
 Or wear them upon a breast so radiantly.

O fierce she was, mean and unaccommodating;  
 But I think now of the toss of her gold earrings,  
 Their proud carnal assertion, and her youngest sings  
 While all the rivers of her red veins move into the sea.<sup>7</sup>

I make this comparison only because I think "Keine Lazarovitch" provides an example of one of the most important functions of poetry. It may be, as Layton



suggests in "The Seesaw," that art offers us little more than "consolatory hints" about the meaning of life and death, but it may also offer "the needed culm for self-propulsion / towards the paling stars." It may, in fact, provide creatures trapped in the natural cycle with eternal life. "Trees in Late Autumn" reveals the role of the imagination in nature:

Slowly they grow towards extinction.  
My window has seen the winter's blasts  
but looks on as impassively  
as city crowds when a man is beaten.

It holds their reflection for me  
like a perfect work of art;  
on sullen days I'm moved to ecstasy  
by images of beauty and death.

.....

A trillion leaves appear and fall;  
season after season they come and go.  
I stare out from my sterile window.  
Even the trees are without faith.

Blindly they put forth, sicken and die.  
I am the sole meaning they have;  
only if I will it to happen  
will they shoot from their roots and fly.

One of the jobs of the poet, then, is to recognize and decipher historical events and to point the correct way for his culture. In the process, however, he must also understand his own limitations and the limits of knowledge itself. In Bologna, there is an artist who is not doing his job. The poem is "Bottles":

Mussolini came and went,  
likewise the war,  
Hiroshima, the Holocaust,  
Stalin, the smooth displacement of culture  
by pornography:  
he painted only bottles  
and one famous self-portrait.  
There must be a deep meaning  
in this somewhere  
but what it is  
I cannot tell  
but must wait for instruction  
from a wise old whore  
a philosopher  
or death at my door.

The bottle-painter, in fact, *lives* in a bottle and so has only “one famous self-portrait,” but the poet, too, lives in a bottle — perhaps slightly larger than that of the painter — but smaller (in terms of knowledge) than that of “a wise old whore / a philosopher / or death.”

Even if the poet’s knowledge is limited, his chief responsibility is to articulate what he *does* know instinctively: the difference between honesty and corruption. His role in the world is not unlike that of the ancient prophets, for “In the creative word lies redemption,” writes Layton in “The Carillon”:

Utterance alone can heal the ailing spirit  
and make man and poet a single self;  
bring back on the long vein of memory  
the laughter and wholeness of childhood.

Moreover, integrity is the *sine qua non* of great poetry: “impurity and self-betrayal / make the prophet’s voice clunk like a cracked bell.” To make it “chime like a carillon,” he must ferret out truth in the belief that in so doing he will bring peace:

Like a sponge the poet soaks up the sewage  
of evil trespass and self-delusion  
running through the ruts of this dark epoch.  
His head is a black cloud about to burst.

From his own self must come light and truth,  
the long-awaited word to stifle discord. . . .

As peacemakers the best poets realize that their job is, to say the least, difficult because language itself is corrupt. Presumably, people in a state of communion — if such a state were possible — need not communicate because they already *understand* one another without the use of words. Language implies that mutual understanding is imperfect. Layton is well aware of the distinction between communion and communication. In an otherwise whimsical poem, called “What Do You Think of Mitterand?” he says, “A point is always reached when I can’t distinguish / between lust and language. . . .” Lust is rooted in communication, whereas love comes closer to communion. So poetry is, at least in part, about love, but love in a fallen world.

“The Garden” of *The Gucci Bag*, therefore, is a post-Edenic one in which life and death play out their interminable struggle, but one in which lurk both poetry and immortality:

The grass is waiting to cover me  
like a warm overcoat, green with age;  
the bough’s luxuriant leaves are sleeves  
ready to embrace or hold me down.

Nature conspires with and against  
me, brief shuttle between womb and tomb,  
a centimetre on which is notched  
immense vistas of anguish and gloom.

Confidently I sit here and write  
though dark shadows gather near the house  
and the birds have left off their singing.  
The fly's cry is trapped in the neat web.

One day, my head full of summer noise  
or an etude by Frederic Chopin,  
the wind lifting me up by the elbows  
will hustle me out of the garden.

Other insects shall come, other leaves grow.  
This garden will never be empty;  
my wraith will be that white butterfly.  
Return a thousand years from now and see.

What else can be expected of a book of poetry but that it provide us with insight into the state of the world and some suggestions as to how to improve it? The real and the imagined are drawn so poignantly and the human condition — as it is and as it could be — expressed so unequivocally, that the “chimes” of *The Gucci Bag* — like strains of Yeats’s “intolerable music” — leave us longing to hear more.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Irving Layton, “Youth and Age 1981,” *The Gucci Bag* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1983), pp. 109-10. All references to *The Gucci Bag* are to this edition.
- <sup>2</sup> Wynne Francis, “Layton and Nietzsche,” *Canadian Literature*, no. 67 (Winter 1976), pp. 39-52.
- <sup>3</sup> This poem is incorrectly listed in the M & S edition as “Of One Fairy and Two Goddesses.”
- <sup>4</sup> Layton, “Family Portrait” (1958), rpt. in *A Wild Peculiar Joy* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982), p. 75.
- <sup>5</sup> “Xians” were introduced to Layton’s poetic vocabulary after the publication of *For My Brother Jesus* (1976). The term refers to Christians who, in spite of their ostensible piety, do not live by the teachings of Jesus. Layton writes in the foreword to *The Gucci Bag*, “Idds and Xians have this much in common: they both pay lip-service to religious institutions given to them by Hebrew prophets” (p. 11).
- <sup>6</sup> *Rochmonis* is the phonetic spelling of a Yiddish word that has no exact equivalent in English, but it is akin to a deep and enduring compassion.
- <sup>7</sup> Layton, “Keine Lazarovitch: 1870-1959” (1961), rpt. in *A Wild Peculiar Joy*, p. 86.

# DIONYSIANS IN A BAD TIME

*Irving Layton*

August Strindberg. Brutal wars with women  
exhausted him and he forgot his atheism  
and despair, forgot the sentimental red-eyed demons  
that cast their nets for the human soul. Yes, guilts  
will rot a man worse than syphilis.

At the end.

closing his eyes he mumbled pieties  
heard at his mother's knee,  
clutching a mournful tinplate Jesus to his breast.  
AVE CRUX SPES UNICA

After the cocktails and compliments  
men turn wolves, women bare their serpent fangs.  
Kazantzakis, too, crowed like chanticleer;  
crowed once and fell silent,  
numbed by the stellar chill, the vacuity  
human swarms make  
beneath immense star clusters moving in empty space.

At life's close,

comfortless as a newborn babe he too sank back  
into the primal womb. Come, my enamoured friends,  
let us pluck splinters  
from the stolid cross sprouting from his pierced heart.

*San Jose*

*March 3, 1984*

# FOOL'S WEEK

*Patrick Friesen*

a day like any other

monday morning I felt  
like not going to work  
for no reason  
so I didn't