

LAYTON AND NIETZSCHE

Wynne Francis

LAYTON HAS NEVER made any secret of his debt to Nietzsche. On the contrary he draws our attention to it insistently — by choice of words and phrases (etiolation, antinomies, the glare of noontide, joyful wisdom, the stillest hour, good Europeans, new tables); by symbols (sun, flame, fire, star, dance, serpent); by explicit reference in titles and elsewhere to Apollo, Dionysus, Heraclitus, Zarathustra, the ubermensch, Eternal Recurrence. Prefaces as well as poems abound in themes and motifs drawn from Nietzsche: his Heraclitean premises, his Hellenism, his moral psychology, his repudiation of Christianity, his aversion to orthodoxies, institutions, systems, his affirmation of life, his unflinching faith in the redemptive powers of creativity. With such evidence as this Layton certainly leaves no doubt as to the Nietzschean cast of many of his ideas.

There is more than an affinity of minds between the two writers. Layton claims that he “recognized himself” in Nietzsche, that Nietzsche’s work confirmed his own vision of reality. It was at least partly a matter of temperament. Layton had no need to borrow from Nietzsche what he already possessed: a cheerful disposition, a volatile temper, a contrariety of spirit, a love of paradox, a zest for controversy and polemic, a strong sense of irony, a voracious appetite for life. Add to this a charismatic personality, a sense of mission, the gift of rhetorical persuasion and an extraordinary measure of self-confidence. Layton brought all these qualities to his reading of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, for example, and without doubt they facilitated his acceptance of the ideas he found therein. The two men are obviously kindred spirits and Layton responded as one of “the few” to whom Nietzsche directed his message.

The fact of “recognizing” himself in Nietzsche had the catalytic effect of releasing a torrent of creative energy which through the years Layton has spent, para-

doxically, in "finding" himself. Exploring reality through his poems has involved plumbing the depths of his own experience and thereby discovering himself. Nietzsche urged upon his followers the need to discover the "true self": "Become who you are!" If we have any doubt that Layton has been acting on this prescription we need only look at the poem "There were no signs", he chose to place at the beginning of both the 1965 and the 1971 *Collected Poems*.

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 I have the boldness to be that man.

Another step
And I shall be where I started from.

During the Forties when Layton's orientation was predominantly Marxist his poetic output though significant in quality was relatively slight in volume. He knew himself to be a poet even then and he worked hard at perfecting his craft; but his vision was diffuse, its emotive potential relatively low. The impact of Nietzsche took effect early in the Fifties. It clarified Layton's vision, brought it suddenly into sharp focus. And it swept away the cobwebs of his Marxism, for the dialectical interpretation of history which had attracted Layton to Marx is also present in Nietzsche but in a form more hospitable to the spirit of lyric poetry and more consistent with Layton's own observations of current world politics.

Between 1951 and 1958 Layton published ten books of poetry (including the thirty-one poems in *Cerberus*). In each of these books successively, the structure of his vision was more fully elaborated until its outline was clearly defined in "For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation on Flies and Kings" (1958).¹ Recognizing this poem as an important statement Layton chose from it the title of his next book, a volume of collected poems, *A Red Carpet for the Sun*. This title phrase is taken from the very fruit of his "Meditation . . ." — a quatrain of intensely fused

metaphor which is Nietzschean to the core and, in retrospect, quintessentially Layton.

They dance best who dance with desire,
Who lifting feet of fire from fire
Weave before they lie down
A red carpet for the sun.

Among other important poems of the Fifties which are profoundly Nietzschean are "In the Midst of My Fever", "Seven O'Clock Lecture", "The Cold Green Element" and "Whatever Else Poetry is Freedom". Conceived during a period of extreme personal anguish each of these poems is a powerful statement on the function of poetry and the fate of the poet, themes which are central to both Nietzsche and Layton. Almost all of the lesser poems of that decade can also be read with profit in the Nietzschean perspective. Their astonishing variety of subject matter and style attest to the fecundity of Layton's imagination and the versatility of his talent as well as to his thorough command of Nietzschean idioms and motifs. His first Nietzschean preface was written in the Fifties also. It appeared as a "Note" to the second printing of *A Laughter in the Mind* (1958). The title and the inscription for this book are drawn from Nietzsche, and the preface makes the first emphatic statement of themes which dominate Layton's "Forewords" from then on. One has only to compare this "Note" with his untitled preface to his work in *Cerberus* (1952) to realize how much of a hold Nietzsche has taken on Layton's thought during the intervening years.

During the Sixties and Seventies the outpouring of Layton's talent continued unabated, his Nietzschean base still firm. The increase in recent years in the number of introspective poems should not deceive us; they are quite consistent with the duty of the "ubermensch" to seek his true self. Nor should the Israeli poems distract us. They are not a departure but a fulfilment of Layton's dream of the Jews — namely that they possess the greatest potential to become "higher men".² Witness the admiration he shares with Nietzsche for the Old Testament prophets, including the "last" and greatest of them, Jesus of Nazareth. Of the poems that have been born of Layton's far-flung travels in these two decades, the occasional exotic subject does not obscure the basic vision. In fact, the hundreds of poems Layton has published since "For Mao Tse-Tung" have not changed either the outline or the internal structure of that vision. What they have contributed is a fabulous intricacy of patterning and a rich texture. Layton's "red carpet" is of a close and expert weave.

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. What Eliot found in Christianity was a store of images which he felt to be true and a mythic structure upon which to articulate his vision. Layton's talent is his own; his originality, like that of any other poet, derives from his imagination and his personal life experience. Nothing in Nietzsche prepares us for the pathos of "The Bull Calf", the poignancy of "Berry Picking", the curious, symbolic drama of "The End of the White Mouse", the gaiety of "The Day Aviva Came to Paris", the wry good humour of "Shakespeare" or the fun, the rage, the terror, the delight — to say nothing of the fine craftsmanship — with which Layton makes his poetic statements. Nor does a reading of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, for example, prepare us for the brilliance with which Layton develops the sun imagery to be found therein. He has made the sun a central symbol in his work and has elaborated an intricate and thoroughly consistent pattern of fire and flame imagery to support it. Once the significance of the sun symbolism is fully recognized, literally hundreds of Layton's poems can be read with great insight without recourse to Nietzsche. Yet the basic Nietzschean structure is there, throughout, and to be aware of it is to read all of Layton more intelligently.

We have noted that a central concern of both writers is the nature and function of art and that Layton has explored the role and fate of the artist in a number of his finest and most complex poems. His most lucid rendering of the Nietzschean aesthetic is the much-anthologized "The Birth of Tragedy" (1954). This poem has of course been enjoyed by thousands of readers without benefit of Nietzsche but for those who wish to explore it deeply some awareness of the source of its ideational content is mandatory.

The title of the poem is identical with that of Nietzsche's famous first book, a prolix essay on the origin of art. In retrospect, Nietzsche condemned this essay as being too Hegelian and dualistic — "errors" which he corrected in his later work; but he never repudiated or abandoned the premises he established in *The Birth of Tragedy* regarding the dialectical nature of art and the supremacy of aesthetic over all other values. These ideas were seeds which flowered in all his later works. Since Layton throughout his work takes account of both the seeding and the flowering of Nietzsche's aesthetic we need first to look at the early statement and then extract from the later work those developments which are relevant to Layton's poetry.

THE VERY TITLE of Nietzsche's essay is important, juxtaposing as it does the pain and joy of birth with the suffering and death connoted by tragedy. It introduces a theme which persists throughout Nietzsche's (and Layton's) aesthetic: joy and suffering are inextricably related in both life and art. The essay was intended to trace the history of art from its origins in Greek myth and ritual to its greatest development in tragic opera; but we soon discover that Nietzsche is exploring not merely the history but also, and with greater enthusiasm, the mythic and psychic origins of art. This is implicit in the use he makes of two Greek art-sponsoring deities.

The first of these is Apollo the sun god, god of light and reason and of all the plastic arts, especially poetry. Most significantly, Apollo is the god of transfiguration: it is Apollo's gift of "fair illusion" which enables man to apprehend reality, to find meaning in nature and significance in life. (Nature requires man's reason and imagination to give it meaning: ". . . my forehead bringing/ intelligence into this featureless waste" writes Layton in "Thoughts in the Water" (1956). And "The Fertile Muck" (1956) begins "There are brightest apples on those trees/ but until I, fabulist, have spoken/ they do not know their significance . . . The wind's noise is empty.") Illusion organizes chaos, gives form to experience, permits man the dream of a world of individual "appearances" and a vision of a radiantly harmonious universe where all things individual have their role and importance. This capability Nietzsche calls "redemption through illusion". Raised to the level of art the Apollonian spirit is gloriously manifested, for example, in the rendering of experience through the disciplined rhythms and graceful images of a lyric poem. (The serene joy of Apollo triumphs in Layton's "New Tables" (1954) and in "The Sweet Light Strikes My Eyes" (1968) which ends ". . . God, the sweet light strikes my eyes;/ I am transfigured and once again the world, the world is fair.")

Such a complete victory for Apollo is rare however for he has as a constant adversary a dark god of terrifying power. Dionysus represents reality, the abyss of chaos. He is the ever-turbulent, destructive force which is the unknowable source of all experience. A human being cannot experience reality directly and survive as an integrated whole, for the Dionysian element is the explosive, disintegrating force of raw energy. By itself this energy cannot give meaning to life or produce a work of art, for it is imageless, non-rational, formless. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche relates Dionysus to the non-plastic art of music which he regards as the one artistic expression closest to the "will" of the universe — that ever-

surging discordant energy which is reality. The test of the Apollonian poet is the degree to which he can resolve the discord, translate the dissonance of Dionysus into a tolerable, pleasurable "music". (Layton employs this theme in "Orpheus" (1955): "... the poet's heart/ has nowhere counterpart/ Which can celebrate/ Love equally with Death/ Yet by its pulsing bring/ A music into everything." And elsewhere he extends the "discord-music" metaphor to include "silence". A finished poem, like a musical score, is silent; it has resolved the clashing antinomies and it remains as a vivid record of the struggle with reality: "Energy must crackle on a silent urn . . ." ("The Graveyard", 1968).

The greatest poetry in other words is that which takes the fullest account of reality. Apollo's triumph of serenity and joy must be won at the necessary expense of a tragic struggle with the Dionysian forces of darkness, chaos, suffering and death. Throughout *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche views the development of art as a suspenseful series of dialectical encounters between these two spirits. Apollo always triumphs eventually, else there would be no art to write about, though Nietzsche betrays a very strong attraction to Dionysus without whom Apollo would have no function.

Dionysus makes his most fascinating appearance as the earth god, god of darkness, dismemberment and death, who is associated with the vegetation myths and fertility rituals. Here his dark powers are evoked by jubilant satyrs in frenzied celebrations of creativity and rebirth. In such orgiastic celebrations the individual while under the spell of Dionysus loses himself, gives free reign to his passions, forgets himself completely. For this reason Dionysus is pictured as the god of wine, of intoxication, of rapture, of lust. Extravagant self-abandon dissolves the bond of the individual will, shrugs off the restraints of reason and makes possible an ecstatic communion of the individual with his fellow-creatures and with all of nature. At such moments man is returned to the "material womb of being" where he enjoys a sense of union with the original Oneness of the universe. This is the Dionysian experience which for Nietzsche represents another mode of redemption. (Layton's satirical poems offer a veritable troupe of Dionysian revellers — satyrs, nymphs, fauns, inebriates, gamblers, rakes and roués, some modern, some bearing Greek or Roman names — all of whom engage in some form of self-abandon and thumb their noses gleefully at respectability, prudery, repression and self-righteousness. Many of his love poems emphasize the delirious joy and the redemptive power of lust. And in some of his most complex poems the Dionysian reveller takes the form of a social outcast — a buffoon, a crippled poet, a caged artist, a cretinous child, a murdered dwarf, a madman frenzied by his revered vision. All

such poems reveal a tragic loss of self as the cost of a deeper insight into reality; and the pain, suffering and "death" involved are suffused with an anguished ecstasy.)

But this form of redemption, Nietzsche claims, cannot be known as such until the Apollonian spirit "rescues" the individual, asserts control over the flood of passion and sublimates it in a form that can be apprehended, contemplated and enjoyed. Considering such formative power it would seem to follow that the proper name for the artist as such is Apollo. On the contrary Nietzsche insists that art has its origins in two radically dissimilar realms and that the greatest form of art derives from a dialectical tension between the two. The artist in *The Birth of Tragedy* is Janus-faced; his name is hyphenated: Apollo-Dionysus. The two spirits, linked in a tense and tragic struggle, give birth to the greatest, most redemptive forms of art. But the hyphenation also indicates that the two gods of art are united against a common enemy. Nietzsche, describing the history of Greek tragedy, attributes its eventual decline to the growth of the Socratic spirit. The name he gives to the forces which are inimical to art is Socratism.³

Socratism is the spirit of rational inquiry which seeks always to interpose theoretical knowledge between experience and reality. It substitutes "truth" for reality, implying that reality is knowable and that the way to it is through logic and reasoning. Socratism prevails wherever men put their faith in science and technology, in education and progress, in evolution, social engineering or political programmes, to the virtual exclusion of "spiritual" and aesthetic modes of redemption. By extension, the term Socratism implies Nietzsche's censure of all closed systems and orthodoxies (be they philosophical, scientific, political or religious) which paralyze the will, expunge the mythic dimension of experience and relegate the blessedness and perfection of man to some future historical period or after-life. The Socratic mentality breeds an easy optimism and a false pessimism (both objectionably romantic) and evades the real issue of man's predicament. A society in which this mentality is prevalent exerts a levelling force: it sacrifices the individual to the state; it suppresses the non-conformist and the heretic and it will not tolerate the artist except as a very tame version of Apollo. (These are motifs which govern many of Layton's prefaces and characterize numerous poems in which he attacks the mentality of the bourgeois, the philistine, the bureaucrat, the academic, the critic, Marxists and especially Russian communists. As for tame poets, Layton's contempt is writ large in such poems as "The Modern Poet", "No Shish Kebab" and "Anti Romantic" as well as in several "Forewords" where he castigates poets for their cowardliness.)

And since the spirit of Socratism is intent upon either the correction or the extirpation of all evil and disruptive forces, its chief target, Nietzsche claims, is Dionysus whom it will ostracize, incarcerate or destroy at every opportunity. ("Dionysus is dead:" says Layton in his "Foreword" to *A Red Carpet for the Sun* (1959), "his corpse seethes white-maggoty with social-workers and analysts." The many poems which feature the artist being tormented and rejected by a "Socratic" society culminate in the strikingly original "With the Money I Spend" (1961). Here the poet speaks to his loved one who represents the spirit of Beauty, Poetry: "The Leninists are marching on us./ Their eyes are inflamed with social justice./ Their mouths are contorted with the brotherhood of man./ Their fists are heavy with universal love. . .")

Nietzsche regards such a society as having lost touch with reality. It is sick and very much in need of redemption. This judgment applies to the whole post-Socratic Christian world. Among his own contemporaries Nietzsche described a limpness of spirit, a moral flaccidity, an apathy in the face of evil — the result of centuries of excessive rationalism, debilitating Christian values,⁴ and an evasive and enervating romanticism. Man's capacity for heroism has atrophied, leaving him defenceless against the forces of destruction. Nietzsche foresaw that a rising tide of superstition, mysticism, violence, meaningless wars and terrorism would engulf the Twentieth Century. To be saved, to be restored to health and sanity, modern man must revive the tension between good and evil and regain a respect for the terrible powers of Dionysus. And he must recognize the evil in himself and assume the burden of guilt. Only then can he hope to organize the chaos of Dionysianism and rechannel his energies towards creative redemption. (Layton, who has lived to see Nietzsche's dark prophecies come true, is not so sure that redemption is close at hand. The horrors and obscenities of current events continue to provide him with tragic documentation of his own psychological and megapolitical vision. As Nietzsche's heir, and as a poet-prophet in his own right, he continues to exhort his fellow men to recognize the evil of their days, to accept their share of guilt and to strive to create a new life of dignity, sanity and freedom.)

Nietzsche closes *The Birth of Tragedy* with a call for the restoration of the tragic vision — a firm reworking of the powers of Apollo and Dionysus. If this can be assured, he is more than willing to give Socratism its due: it is a necessary antithesis to art at its best and an eternal provocation to the assertion of the supremacy of aesthetic values. On this note *The Birth of Tragedy* ends, with a call to Dionysus to take his place at the centre of the stage.

It remains to observe how in Nietzsche's later work the figure of Dionysus comes

to dominate the stage. For, conceived at first as Apollo's antagonist, then linked with him in a common enterprise, Dionysus eventually assumes Apollo's full power and prestige. This most significant transformation comes about with Nietzsche's discovery of the "will-to-power".

At first he saw this concept as referring only to human psychology, as the basic eros urging man beyond self-preservation to fulfilment and perfection through the overcoming of the self. But then he extended it to all living things: Nature's reckless fecundity offered endless examples. Finally he saw that it characterized the entire cosmos. As such it was implicit in the "will of the universe" referred to in *The Birth of Tragedy*; but the cosmic will-to-power is no longer a frenzied undirected striving but rather the irrefutable urge to become which is forever forming and dissolving and reforming — giving birth to itself, dying and being reborn. To this will-to-power Nietzsche gave the name of Dionysus. Thereafter Dionysus is reality in process and Nietzsche now views him as the ultimate goal as well as the primary source of all existence.

Dionysus no longer requires Apollo to give him form; for within himself he provides for the dialectic between form and chaos, forever destroying and creating himself. As such he becomes the Eternal Creator in a Heraclitean universe of flux wherein the basic element is fire. Thus he even approximates Apollo's symbol, the sun. Zarathustra is a sunworshipper, and Nietzsche declares himself a worshipper in the "Dionysian faith". (The last verse of Layton's "Logos" (1964) expresses this faith: "I laugh and praise the Dionysian/ Everywhere irrational thrust/ That sends meteors spilling/ into dust/ This enchantment risen in the bone." So does "Zoroastrian" which begins "I want nothing/ to ever come/ between me and the sun . . ." In fact hundreds of his poems containing sun and flame imagery can be read with deeper insight as the tributes of a Dionysian to his God. And we may note that whenever Layton uses the word "God" seriously in his poems or prefaces, it is Dionysus to whom he most often refers. Fortuitously Dionysus as Layton and Nietzsche conceive him is not incompatible with either Heraclitus' Eternal Flux or the Jehovah of the Old Testament, a circumstance which allows for considerable flexibility in the interpretation of Layton's work.)⁵

In the light of his Dionysian faith Nietzsche entertains the hypothesis of Eternal Recurrence which postulates that everything that happens happens again and again forever, albeit in cycles (Great Years) which span periods of time longer than any known history. (Layton's "Eternal Recurrence" (1971) is a quite literal rendering of this concept. More subtle are "Orpheus" (1955) and "If I Lie Still" (1963).) The idea was not original with Nietzsche and at first he

found it abhorrent because it implied no end to pain, suffering and death. His Dionysian faith however assured him that by the same token life, creativity and joy could also recur eternally. If Eternal Recurrence is ground for a necessary pessimism it also offers the potential for boundless joy.

But the question remains: how can a man so sanctify every moment that he might want to live it again and again? Nietzsche's pessimism led him to despair of mankind in general: the many seem incapable of more than endurance, passive suffering. (Layton expresses his compassionate contempt for the *massen-mensch* in "For Mao Tse-Tung . . ." (1958) and numerous other poems; he differs from Nietzsche only to the extent that he puts out the call to all men to become "creative sufferers" though without much hope of response.) "The few", those to whom Nietzsche directed his message, might learn to live the "good life". To these he held up the ideal of the *übermensch*. (This figure is named in several of Layton's poems; in others he appears in various guises, notably as Layton's persona in "Beach Acquaintance" (1967) and as the more subdued figure in "A Dedication" (1964).)

The *übermensch* is not a man of the future, the goal of evolution. And certainly he is not a supernatural saviour or superman. (Layton ridicules these misconceptions in "Paging Mr. Superman" (1958).) Nor, though he has appeared in history (Socrates, Caesar, Napoleon, Goethe are Nietzsche's examples), is he the product of history or of anything but himself. The *übermensch* creates and recreates himself through self-knowledge and self-discipline. He is a passionate man who learns to control his passions; a man of reason who trains himself to act rationally as if by instinct; a suffering man who takes joy in life whatever the cost. He exults in the will-to-power which pulses so strongly through him driving him to "cultivate" himself, to strive continuously toward higher modes of being. He is strict with himself and ruthless toward anyone or anything which threatens to inhibit him or restrict his freedom to change and grow. Thus he grows from weakness into strength, from sickness into health, from cowardliness and slavery into boldness and freedom. ("Out of infirmity, I have built strength . . ." writes Layton in "There Were No Signs", ". . . Almost now I know Who I am./ Almost I have the boldness to be that man. . .")

The *übermensch* is a Yea-sayer. Nietzsche's formula for greatness is "amor-fati" — the joyous affirmation of one's own existence and of the life-force in eternity. (Layton, praising the flame of life as it passes through him writes: "'Affirm life,' I said, 'Affirm/ The triumphant grass that covers the worm;/ And the flesh, the swinging flesh/ That burns on its stick of bone.'" ("The Swinging

Flesh", 1961)) The *übermensch* is a Dionysian. His self-realization is a continuous process of self-discovery and self-overcoming. His achievement is not to be judged in moral or utilitarian terms; rather, like a work of art, he is valued for his wholeness, his integrity and grace — in a word, his style. ("It's all in the manner of the done," says Layton, "Manner redeemeth everything: / redeemeth man, sets him up among, / over, the other worms, puts / a crown on him, yes, size of a / mountain lake, / dazzling more dazzling! / than a slice of sun" ("It's All in The Manner", 1954).)

"The most spiritual men are the strongest," claims Nietzsche.⁶ And the most powerful life is the creative life. It is not surprising therefore that of the types of men with the mark of the *übermensch* (the hero, the philosopher) Nietzsche favours the artist. The Dionysian artist "creates himself", as Nietzsche said of Goethe, through his art, and he delights in the process however painful and self-destructive it may be. He is thereby most like a god — like Dionysus — overjoyed with his continuous recreation of himself in the universe. Dionysus the eternal creator is god the eternal artist. The human Dionysian poet is therefore both the creation and the analogue of the divine artist, since he recreates himself and the world in every poem he writes.

This final vision of the Dionysian artist was implicit in Nietzsche's earliest book. In an ecstatic passage in *The Birth of Tragedy* he wrote: "Only as an aesthetic product can the world be justified to all eternity. . . . Only as the genius [e.g., the poet] in the act of creation merges with the primal architect of the cosmos can he truly know something of the eternal essence of art. . . . He is at once the subject and object, poet, actor and audience." (To realize how closely Layton parallels Nietzsche even to this conclusion one need only read his "Like a Mother Demented" (1968), a poem in which man's dilemma and the irony of the whole cosmic drama implied above is made tragically clear.)

THE PERSONA in Layton's "The Birth of Tragedy"⁷ is Nietzsche's Dionysian artist. With the accent on "birth", on becoming, the poem explores the creative process on three interconnected levels—the natural, the human and the cosmic. Happily engaged in the writing of his poem the poet delights in his ability to give meaning to the life-and-death process which he observes in his natural surroundings. (" . . . In me, nature's divided things / . . . have their fruition.") He pays tribute to Apollo and Dionysus ("the perfect gods") whose spirits assist and reward his strivings. He exults in his own growth, sacrificing his

old self as he gives birth to a new one. He rejoices in his freedom as one who, accepting his fate, enjoys a harmony with the whole of the destructive-creative continuum. He salutes the cosmic artist at work in the universe as the "birthday" of a new cycle of existence is celebrated. And since the creative process is one of eternal recurrence the last line returns us to the beginning where we find the poet in the act of redeeming the moment: "And me happiest when I compose poems."

The poem is not "Dionysian" in the popular sense. It does not exploit the more lurid and dramatic sufferings of the tormented poet, the figure of the dying god shrieking his exultant defiance. By contrast it is the more thoroughly Nietzschean for its exuberance and "cheerfulness". Zarathustra taught not an easy optimism but a cheerful courage. Nietzsche's concept of happiness was a sense of power suffused with joy.

"The Birth of Tragedy" was published in 1954. Twenty years later Layton wrote another poem on the poetic process which deserves to be considered as the obverse side of the same coin. The mood of "The Birth of Tragedy" was one of serene joy, its stanzaic form allowing for fluctuating flame-like rhythms to express elation. "Ithaca" is more tightly structured, its turbulence contained in four taut quatrains to sustain the desired tension. The persona is once again that of the Dionysian poet; but the poem carries us closer, in the poetic process, towards completion and, in the cosmic process, towards the precipice of destruction, dissolution, death. Again the moment of creativity is celebrated, this time the excruciating joyous moment when the poet is about to achieve a finished poem: "... the imperial moment just before/ the relieving ambiguities of ejaculation,/ when he can still urge on his ecstasy/ and ecstasy and fate are one . . ." High in the sky Helios, too, appears to await the zenith: "... the exact instant of plenitude and decline . . ." ("Mid-day; moment of the shortest shadow;" wrote Nietzsche, "end of the longest error; zenith of mankind; *incipit Zarathustra*.") Layton greets the moment of fruition and destruction with an ecstatic "amor-fati" as the last verse captures the climax in a fitting Heraclitean image:

The total white exquisiteness before corruption
when the wave's wide flaunting crest
with smash and tumult prepares to break
into bleak nothingness on Ithaca's shore.

In 1974 Layton also published *The Pole-vaulter* the title of which is taken from the poem "Pole-vaulter", its persona an ageing *übermensch*: "... Spry and drugged with love/ I pole-vault/ over my grave." The book is dedicated to

two contemporary Jewish women writers who in their fight against Russian Communism exhibit heroic courage. "The world is redeemed by [such] pole-vaulters," says Layton in the Foreword. The book has two inscriptions. The first is drawn from Nietzsche:

In the end it must be as it is and always has been:
great things remain for the great, abysses for the
profound, nuances and shudders for the refined,
and, in brief, all that is rare for the rare.

The second inscription reads:

We must live so we can tell what man is capable of
doing to man. Perhaps this is God's will.
"Jew in Treblinka"

The most recent volume of Layton's selected poems, *The Unwavering Eye*, (1975), takes its title from a poem which pays explicit tribute to Nietzsche. It concerns a response to life and to oncoming death. The poet observes the elements of nature engaged in their eternal dialectic. Over them presides the symbol of Dionysus, the great eye of the sun, now "glaucomic". A central symbol in Layton's work, the sun here represents the steady gaze of Nietzsche whose vision, though blurred towards the end by madness, never flinched from reality. "... Nietzsche, hero and martyr . . . died innocent, a gentle lunatic . . ."

The abyss belched
and pulled him downward
by the two ends of his drooping moustache

Now I cannot look
at a solitary sunlit stone
and not think of Nietzsche's unwavering eye

Nietzsche did not want disciples; he provided no dogma or system which "followers" might lean on. Zarathustra taught the over-coming of the self, the glorification of the moment; the affirmation of life through all eternity. A true Dionysian is on his own: he must assert his joy in his own individual existence with all that entails of cosmic dialectics, history, heredity, environment and personal attributes. Thus, though much in Layton becomes clearer through an understanding of his Nietzscheanism, his talent and originality derive from a combination of sources unique to him. Nietzsche sometimes spoke of the will-to-power as an

“instinct of freedom”. As a poet, Layton equates these terms with his gift in one of his finest poems on the poetic process:

So whatever else poetry is freedom. Let
 Far off the impatient cadences reveal
 A padding for my breathless stilts. Swivel
 O hero, in the fleshy groves, skin and glycerine,
 And sing of lust, the sun's accompanying shadow
 Like a vampire's wing, the stillness in dead feet —
 Your stave brings resurrection, O aggrieved king.

(“Whatever Else Poetry Is Freedom”, 1958)

NOTES

- ¹ I have elsewhere published a close reading of this poem which reveals its Nietzschean structure.
- ² Cf. “Note” to *A Laughter in the Mind*: “A Hebrew, I worship the Divine in extraordinary men, know that all flesh is grass and that everything ripens into decay and oblivion. . . . It seems to me now I have always known this. . . .” As a post-Christian pagan Layton draws on both Hellenic culture and Hebraic values. His yearly travels in Greece and his concern with Twentieth Century Jewish history lend immediacy to this traditional dialectic especially in his poems of the Sixties and Seventies.
- ³ Nietzsche is as ambivalent towards Socratism as he is towards Christianity. His attacks on these forces are directed against their negative effects, as he sees them. He has a great reverence for the “true” Socratic spirit of inquiry, and he reserves an important place for reason in his philosophy.
- ⁴ Nietzsche's chief score against Pauline Christianity — as distinct from the original teachings of Jesus — is that it has lent itself as an ally and instrument to the Socratic state by sanctifying repression of the passions and self-effacement of the individual and by promoting thereby a “slave morality”. (For similar reasons Layton has aimed scores of attacks at the rigidly orthodox, the hypocritically pious and the puritanical among both Christians and Jews.)
- ⁵ Considering the omnipotence of this Dionysus one may ponder the role of Apollo in Layton's work. In his “Foreword” to *The Swinging Flesh* (1960) he says: “Like all artists I am concerned with Appearance and Reality and with the traffic that goes on between them. Appearance I both love and distrust and think of as an enchanting mistress, fertile in invention, endlessly playful.” Allowing for the change of sex, this mistress is Apollo. In the perspective of the Dionysian faith everything is antinomial: Apollo's gift of “illusion” is therefore also “deception”, the “will to falsehood in the hearts of men” (“Seven O'clock Lecture”). Poets are “liars”; poems are “anodynes” — temporary relief from the pain and suffering of existence. “Art also finally crumbles and falls back into life as the water-lily's brightness crumbles into the pondscum that surrounds it.” (*A Red Carpet for the Sun*, 1959.)
- ⁶ It is important to note that Nietzsche makes no division between the physical, the mental and the spiritual. The spiritual is simply the highest manifestation of the will-to-power.
- ⁷ I have elsewhere published a detailed explication of this poem.