IRVING LAYTON AND THE THEME OF DEATH

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IT SEEMS GROSSLY CONTRADICTORY to associate a vigorous and volatile *enfant terrible* of Canadian letters with the subject of death in any remote way. Layton himself, however, is the first to admit that there is an obvious, profound and multi-faceted connection between death and the image of the sun which persistently and provocatively animates his poetry. The Layton individuality — his restless energy, his warrior words, strong verbs and startling metaphors, constantly wrestling with meaning, actively and obstinately as life itself, their "panache and chutzpa," to quote one review of *Selected Poems*, is a function of his basic relationship as poet and man to the force of death. Strife, to adapt a comment of Kaufmann's upon Nietzsche, is a feature of his absolute. The constant tug of war between life and death, between creation and destruction is the very definition of life. Layton sees life as a series of contesting opposites, all variations of the basic tension. Poetry is his expression of the contest, and he identifies poetry as " . . . an ironic balance of tensions."[1] For Layton, the life force or creative process is possible only through some form of death.

Looking at the bulk of Layton's poetry from this point of view, one discovers in it a compelling story, the final chapter of which reveals a creative giant, closely related to the Nietzschean "overman," for whom "the will to power," which also underlies all life, is possible only through death. The two writers meet at many other points, both imagistically and philosophically.

Of course, the realm of nature exemplifies the creation-destruction cycle at its most innocent, at its purest. That Layton takes his initial impulse from nature is

evident in many poems, the most obvious being a kind of "nature" poem, deftly handled, that usually provokes questions about his role as creator, or about the condition of art itself. "Red Chokecherries" serves to illustrate with fiery urgency a process of destruction that is both recognized and anticipated.

> In the sun
> The chokecherries are a deep red.
> They are like clusters of red jewels.
>
> They are like small rubies
> For a young queen who is small and graceful.
> When the leaves turn, I see her white shoulder.
>
> They are too regal to eat
> And reduce to moist yellow pits.
> I will let the air masticate them
>
> And the bold maggot-making sun.
> So I shall hardly notice
> How perfection of form is overthrown.

The particular life of cherries is brief, perhaps a summer's length, perhaps a day's; it is also beautiful and intense. The fruits perish when they reach perfection. The sun that nourishes them also destroys them. Nature's procedures are self-sufficient. Sun and air perform the inevitable. The extermination of any organic thing is the dissolution of an individual form of nature into her undifferentiated life-death cycle. Man, however, tends to complicate matters.

The world of art is alluded to in the word "form." Art, the hopefully permanent legacy of man, art as well as nature, is subject to continuing change. This is not an easy premise for man to accept, and yet it is based on one magnificently simple principle, stated now by Nietzsche: "Everything that is generated must be prepared to face its painful dissolution . . . , because of the constant proliferation of forms pushing into life, because of the extravagant fecundity of the world will,"[2] that is the creative principle. Thus, as the perfection of natural form is overthrown constantly, art repeatedly crumbles back into life.[3]

The irony of this fact for Layton is best expressed in a group of poems which may be called the "graveyard poems," the most outstanding of which is "Côte des Neiges Cemetary."

> As if it were a faultless poem, the odour
> Is both sensuous and intellectual,

Layton expresses sneering distaste for monuments — graves *and* poems. He is

exultant with the knowledge that they cannot last but must dissolve back into the flow of life. There are no permanent structures. What the poet understands over and above the insult to life sustained by senatorial statuary and wasting mausoleums is "... our mortal tongues furred with death: / A ghost city where live autumn birds flit." Birds over a graveyard, this image for life's irrepressible upsurge through death is triumphant. Graveyards as human monuments represent death and life; but they also insure life through death. Hence, they constitute an "Undying paradox!" in which Layton can rejoice as a man and as a poet.

Because death is not, for man, the pure process it is for nature, some of Layton's "nature poems" point to man's complexity, and to his consequent dilemma, more than they do to nature's simplicity. "One View Of A Dead Fish" contrasts the difference between nature and man with telling precision:

> Had it been a drowned child
> it should have owned some proof
> of birth, of sagacious forbears
> for this neutral water:
> someone to mourn, a name.
>
> But being a rotting fish
> its fins, a red streak in the crumpled
> water, mattered to no one
> nor the white
> of its decomposing beauty.
>
> Ludicrous its solemnity
> on the throbbing water.

One feels the poem's pain, only in its allusions to man, whose consciousness of the anonymity of death, and of its ravages, brings him a terrible awareness of suffering, a feeling of uncomfortable ambiguity towards an oblivious nature.

Another group of poems deals with the old age and death of persons for whom Layton has a particular and passionate love — his mother, "Keine Lazarovitch," his father, "Death of Moishe Lazarovitch," an old Spaniard, "Ballad of the Old Spaniard," and a very old woman, "To a Very Old Woman." These people are as vividly and often violently as much a part of the life force as the leaves on trees. Usually they have lived vigorously and so have long courted death; when it finally takes them, they treat it as rudely and familiarly as they might treat an old lover. Those are the people to whom there is no need for Layton to preach life, but from whom he learns it. "Gift," however, provides an exquisitely *understated* rendering

of the poetic association between the audacious simplicity of old age and the implacable march of the seasons.

Under the despoiled tree,
her park seat
soft with golden leaves,
the wrinkled
disconsolate woman
crimsons her lips.
A breeze
detaches the last
red leaf
and lays it
at her feet.

The gestures in the poem are delicate, but they are also ruthless. Nature and the old woman provide each other a fittingly lovely elegy for the annihilation that cannot be stopped.

EROTIC LOVE, too, involves a creative death. Layton's love poetry typically develops what Nietzsche calls the creative " . . . Eros . . . " to be found where "The male insect sacrifices itself to beget offspring, and thus to achieve a form of immortality . . . (in) . . . rebirth."[4] "Winter Light" is a love poem whose very title announces its duality. Light in Layton's poetic is most often the light of fire and sun, while winter is negation. Love includes both. Shiva, the startling manifestation of love, is a more accurate symbol of both the creative and destructive powers of love. Shiva dances in creation and this startling form appears where the poet creates, in his bedroom and on the streets of his neighbourhood, Somerled Avenue. An almost cosmic joy is caught in the exuberant image of a million roosters crying up the sun. Yet, Dionysian ecstasy is premature, or perhaps immature. For both Layton and Nietzsche, the true Dionysian spirit includes Apollo the giver of forms, the maintainer of harmony. "Winter Light" ends in Apollonian serenity: "at night when we embrace / we hear the silence of God." It is not often that Layton leaves his sun behind, but the final lines of this poem bring a brief serenity with the night, a momentary respite from life's constant clamour, a glimpse of the eternal order in the cosmos.

"Thoughts in the Water," while not strictly a love poem, is blatantly sexual and . . . put[s] into opposition . . . " the basic forces of female fertility, or formlessness,

and the intrusive male intelligence. It identifies drowning as a prelude to rebirth and so is an important development in the evolution of the creator, or "overman." The poet's voyage of self-discovery is a symbolic drowning and is depicted in this poem as sensual abandonment and then as savage sexual rape. The warning blow strikes in the third stanza:

> I feel
> her deep vibrations as if a seaplane
> had plunged his ruinous shadow
> like a sword through her coiling body.

She has been taken by sheer and wilful force; the weapon used is murderous. She has been truly ravaged. At the same instant, her brutal lover has been thrust from her: "I fall from her clasp, shuddering, / a senseless interloper, afraid . . . " He pays the penalty of sexual union — everything for a brief instant, and then nothing: "see I shall rise on the water / drowned, and dismally rise . . . " He is drowning; his body rises and falls on the waves. In the rising is implicit rebirth. New and vigorous life is the result of sexual spending. The Nietzschean sense of drowning is the experience of the Dionysiac state. It is a continuing delight in the generation and dissolution of forms of life that leads to an intuitive understanding of " . . . the eternal condition of things, . . . "[5] Eli Mandel describes the action "Thoughts in the Water" in similar terms: "If the poet drowns in the female element, that happens because, though he is the formative principle, she is the generative one."[6]

The poet, in his celebration of the life force, must also experience the death which it brings. He celebrates nature, the Dionysiac reveler, and suffers the passionate death of disintegration. Good poems rage and burn " . . . all things . . . " This is the kind of death described by Layton in most of his poems about poem-making. Their central figure can be identified as Layton's version of the noble savage embodying " . . . a wonderful sensuousness, . . . rich uncorrupted instincts, . . . exuberant rhythms.",[7] or as the Nietzschean " . . . primary man . . . ",[8] close to nature. The Dionysiac man is the " . . . enthusiastic reveler . . . a prophet of wisdom born out of nature's womb; a symbol of the sexual omnipotence of nature."[9]

If the creative artist experiences the death of the Dionysiac, he also experiences the death of the Apollonian. In order to create his poem, the poet must finally differentiate himself from nature, abstract himself from the flux of time. He must, that is, contain primitive energy by means of the Apollonian powers of form, and

for an instant outside of all quotidian reality, experience the death of an absolute. This fusion is best expressed by one of Layton's own poems, *Esthetique*: "Out of . . . burning comes / Mozartian ecstasy leaping with the flames." Hence the poet suffers. Cognizant of the antinomies of his own existence and compelled to wrestle with them, he is "A quiet madman, never far from tears . . . " His defeat and rejuvenation is conveyed by the one image. He lies within nature, experiencing the very heart of its paradox for him:

> 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 . . .

With "The Birth of Tragedy," Layton perceives a unity through opposites, "tree, mould on tree — ". He sees in nature's pattern of life and death his own death and rebirth through poetry. As Mandel puts it, "Poetry appears, then, as a kind of death because, just as 'Living things arrange their death,' 'seasonably' or in the 'fruition' of poetry, so poetry too 'composes' its own death,"[10] of perfect forms or "flowering stone". The gods who can "sustain . . . " the antinomies of existence, " . . . passionate meditations", are finally the gods of a Nietzschean creator, Dionysiac man himself, and for Layton, the poet.

LIKE BLAKE, Layton identifies the zombies of society in terms of its restrictive structures: school, church, state. Such institutions prohibit strength and joy, instinct and passion, and so prevent any kind of creative activity. It is not surprising to find in Layton's poetry that many people exemplify for him a mode of living most accurately described as death-in-life. On his value scale, this state excludes both significant life and significant death. A life of any quality must support the tension between life and death, since the more intensely life is lived, the closer death is. "Against This Death" dramatizes the importance of these concepts. Death-in-life is depicted in the first stanza as " . . . respectable / death", "served up / like ice". It is "slow, certain". By contrast, vigorous death, which presupposes vigorous life, is a function, in this poem, of the flesh, the life of nature, of erotic love, and of the artistic imagination. Layton's long list castigating society's deadbeats, from "sterile academics" and ending with "social workers and psychiatrists", is now a familiar one. "Woman in the Square" and "Westmount

Doll" deride sexlessness. "Bishop Berkeley Goes to Bed" is one of his most succinct and effective satires on the evils of intellectualism. "Sheep, Me, the P.M., and the Stars," and "Paging Mr. Superman" prove to be consuming satires on the ridiculous ignorance and the gullibility and weakness of modern man.

One of the most memorable images, however, of the superman who combats such withering anonymity is contained in "For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation on Flies and Kings." Christianity is, for Layton, chief among life-deniers and this poem proves to be one of his most effective indictments against its emphasis on piety, humility and other-worldliness. It fiercely dramatizes the creator as a revolutionary figure deriving strength from his isolation, and wielding a reckless and passionate cruelty before him which will "Smash insects . . . ", "Feast on torn flowers. . . . ".

Thus we come directly to the question of whether and in what manner man abuses his power over life and death. Man, as he destroys merely for the sake of destruction, is revealed by Layton in poetry of scathing social comment, concentrated in his two books, *Periods of the Moon* and *The Shattered Plinths*. Man gropes, for the most part, in a dismal chaos of war, sickness and sadism. Even Layton's sun image, normally radiating with meaning as the creative eros of the universe, becomes enfeebled, devoid of its power. Any affirmation of cruelty or suffering by creative man is remarkably absent in these books.

This is not true of those poems illustrating the deaths inflicted by man upon nature. Such poems express Layton's "most important working out of a murderous desire . . . "[11] Here, according to Layton, man has a terrible responsibility for he takes advantage of an innocent victim who also provides the artist with his basic impulse to create. Psychologically, then, man's perversity is comprehensible. Yet, the creative superman must affirm the most despicable act of his corrupted power, in order to convert that power to its creative potential. So, through such fine poems as "Bull Calf" and "Cain," man struggles mightily with his primitive instincts, is humbled to see how base they can be, and is finally reinforced for an eventual triumphant act of creation. Man's instinct to destroy need not destroy him.

"A Tall Man Executes a Jig" completes, in one of Layton's major poetic achievements, Layton's poetic story of man as he responds to death. That story turns out to be about man as poet, and ultimately, of course, about Layton himself. It takes us through various experiences of man, as a living death himself, as the murderer of both himself and nature, and as the victim of his own creativity in which his destructive powers are affirmed in the "Joy, and fullness of feeling,

that is the core of the creative mystery." This poem sees man and nature joining together in creation through death.

The "tall man" is, of course, the potential creator. The poem takes us through the deepening levels of his meditation when he questions traditional modes of suffering — pagan, Christian and Hebrew. While retaining all three, he transcends each of them in a series of richly subtle transitions, sweeping them together in an orchestrated movement in which the strident tones of the primitive creator mingle with the tragic and triumphant strains of the informed creator in perfect and beautiful harmony.

Man is at first at one with nature, feeling the sun and grasses, hearing the sounds of birds and flies. Attempting to identify the flies, who begin to distract him slightly, he concludes only that they must represent the frenetic energy of life itself: "Nervous dots". He still maintains unity with nature. Slowly, he begins to differentiate, to theorize. However, man's theories are inefficient to deal with life forces, and so, according to Layton, are his abstract forms. Mind versus matter produces the " . . . savage nightmare" of a Euclid. Nature then intrudes, and the "tall man" is assaulted by the tiny insects. They leave their "orthodox" unrest to become imprisoned in the hairs on his arm. Their energy has been orthodox for them, their transformations effected by the natural forces of sun ("jigging motes") and wind only. Thus, even though they are now restrained, they cannot be changed from what they are — chaotic energy. Yet, this early attempt to form the formless prefigures the role of the creator. Immediately, in fact, the "tall man" feels imprisoned like the flies, an insect only, in the thick grasses and flowers, and he begins to recognize, not only the enormity of his task, but its monumental importance. His potentiality as creative man — artist, philosopher or lover — is predicted in the references to Donatello, Plato and the universal lover in Stanza III.

However, such power is as yet unsubstantiated possibility only. The "tall man" has evolved no aesthetic structure out of nature, and the flies still swarm "Without sense or purpose . . . " to become "Meshed with the wheeling fire of the sun". The sun image also suggests the extent of man's power, its ambivalence in both making and taking away, and the suffering to be paid for that power. The reference to the dying sun as a " . . . god . . . " not only implies the eventual evolution of the "overman" who must "go down" before he may rise enriched, but also the death of all orthodox gods and hence of Christ. The sun bleeds to death in a memorable image symbolizing both the blood of Christ which, for Layton, has failed to redeem man, or even, for that matter, to recognize man, and the

violent blood sacrifice of the creator who must first destroy in order to realize the "Ambition, . . . " of his creative imagination, his " . . . pride, . . . " in his human magnitude and the " . . . ecstasy of sex". Blood alone is no salvation for man, nor is a spiritual ethos, and Layton's disappointment in Christianity is captured poignantly in a few lines:

> He stood still and waited. If ever
> The hour of revelation was come
> It was now, here on the transfigured steep.
> The sky darkened. Some birds chirped. Nothing else.
> He thought the dying god had gone to sleep:
> An Indian fakir on his mat of nails.

That he accepts this failing is evident in the very duality of the sun image, particularly as it leads him directly in Stanza V to examine for validity the Hebrew tradition symbolized as mountain peaks abruptly piercing the sun. So, the poem returns to human terms, as Layton points out the great relevance of the Hebrew tradition which, in its wait for a redeemer, seems to epitomize man's long suffering. Yet, the purpling hills are " . . . silent as time," and the creative man must find his own answers.

The direction now is downwards, and the "tall man" drops the " . . . halo / Of mountains, . . . " as emphatically as he doffed " . . . his aureole of gnats . . . " The object of the remainder of the poem is a snake, perhaps the only true inheritor and preserver of the earth. In its death, and in particular the "tall man's" dying with it, the snake represents the wisdom of the earth. Its temptation is ultimately a temptation to knowledge, for in life it had been:

> The manifest of that joyful wisdom,
> The mirth and arrogant green flame of life;
> Or earth's vivid tongue that flicked in praise of earth.

It is the culminating symbol of Layton's many creature deaths and man's complicated relationship to those deaths. "Your jig's up; . . . "is a death knell for the snake as well as an anticipation of the man's necessary death. The sun has become "A blood-red organ in the dying sky", a shrunken phallus, an image of exhausted energy. The frantic daylight energy of nature has subsided. Night is coming on. Symbolically, the "tall man" is about to discover his own darkness through which he will be reborn in his own light, in this case, the transformation through him of nature into art.

Beside the rigid snake the man stretched out
In fellowship of death; he lay silent
And stiff in the heavy grass with eyes shut,
Inhaling the moist odours of the night
Through which his mind tunneled with flicking tongue
Backwards to caves, mounds, and sunken ledges
And desolate cliffs where came only kites,
And where of perished badgers and racoons
The claws alone remain, gripping the earth.
Meanwhile the green snake crept upon the sky,
Huge, his mailed coat glittering with stars that made
The night bright, and blowing thin wreaths of cloud
Athwart the moon; and as the weary man
Stood up, coiled above his head, transforming all.

For Layton, the story must never end; he does not accept final solutions, even artistic ones, for the condition of art is its constant destruction and renewal through time, and while he lives, it seems he will write. Hence, the life-death cycle, with many stories yet to tell, seems an appropriate metaphor, both for the author's activity and for his continuing output, whatever its subsequent directions are likely to be.

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[2] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and The Geneology of Morals*, trans. by Francis Golffing. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956. Pp. 102-103.

[3] Layton discusses this further in the Foreword to *A Red Carpet for the Sun.*

[4] Kaufmann, Walter. *Nietzsche, Philosopher Psychologist Antichrist*, Cleveland: Meridian Books, The World Publishing Company, 1950. P. 290.

[5] Nietzsche, *Ibid.*, p. 51.

[6] Mandel, Eli. *Canadian Writers & their Works: Irving Layton.* Ed. by William French. Toronto: Forum House Publishing Company, 1969. P. 39.

[7] Layton, Irving. *The Swinging Flesh*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1961. P. xiii.

[8] Nietzsche, *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

[10] Mandel, *Ibid.*, p. 25.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. xxii.