

A GRAB AT PROTEUS

Notes on Irving Layton

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MANY WRITERS ARE BEST read out of their own settings. This is so especially in Canada, where the literary world is small and inbred, and where the self-dramatizing activities of authors are often unnecessarily forced on one's attention by the publicity manoeuvres of publishers. To strike the point of this essay, Irving Layton is a poet whom one reads at his best with delight, and at his worst with a puzzled wonder that so good a poet could write and — even more astonishing — could publish such wretched verse; he is also a rather boring showman, and one wishes often that his public self could be shut off like television so that one might have the silence to listen for his real voice. The only way to begin to appreciate such a poet without distraction is to get away from his immediate presence — even when “immediate” means three thousand miles across Canada, to escape from the antics of poetry readings and the shadow boxing of literary feuds, and to read his poetry where nothing else reminds one of his less attractive masks.

It was by chance rather than deliberation that I took Layton's *Collected Poems*¹ on a journey which led me far from the stamping grounds of the Canadian literati. I carried the fat little gilt-covered volume, with its portrait of the author looking tough, half across Asia. I read Layton in the sweating humidity of the Malabar Coast, in the archaically English clubhouses of tea planters in the Western Ghats, and among Jesuit missionaries in the jungles of the Wynad Hills, with the tribal women howling outside like jackals as they danced to the tapping of monkey-skin drums. I dipped again, reading and re-reading the poems that pleased me, in Delhi, Isfahan, Shiraz, Byblos, Tyre, Sidon, Baalbek, Rome and in the final village in the South Tirol where I at last settled down to outline this

¹ Irving Layton, *Collected Poems*. McClelland & Stewart. \$6.50.

essay. The result was a revelation to me of the extent to which involvement — however remote — in an author's world can limit one's reactions; my dislike of the arrogance with which Layton tries to bully his readers into acceptance had provoked a resistance which I only shed when I was able to perceive, away from the aura of his public personality, the extent and character of his private achievement as a poet.

“To have written even one poem that speaks with rhythmic authority about matters that are enduringly important is something to be immensely, reverently thankful for — and I am intoxicated enough to think I have written more than one.” So claims Layton in the Foreword to his *Collected Poems*, and for once he is modest. After my several readings, I made a list of the poems which still seemed to me complete and moving achievements; there were thirty-five of them. The whole volume contains 385 poems, and thus one poem in every eleven aroused either my delight or my extreme admiration; this left Layton with a better score than most of the poets now writing in either North America or Britain.

The poems which have been selected for the retrospective collection are, of course, those which Layton now, at the beginning of his fifties, has decided are worth retaining; like all such volumes, it is a reckoning with time, a summation of achievement, a placing before the poet's contemporaries — and, by implication, before posterity — of the works by which he feels he should be remembered. Many a shoddy piece of doggerel which astonished one in an earlier volume is left out; many writers who were the subjects of personal attacks will feel half-relieved and half-disappointed that Mr. Layton has chosen to withdraw their certificates of vicarious immortality. The mass of poems which will please those who critically admire Layton as a poet forms an impressive achievement; many more than half the 385 pieces are sufficiently interesting and craftsmanly to be worth preserving, even if they are not among the thirty-odd first-rate poems. At the same time, there are still enough injudiciously chosen fragments to provoke those Layton-baiters whose comments will in turn provoke the poet into delighted reprisals. For all his flamboyance of manner, Layton is capable of some extraordinary lapses into mere triteness and triviality:

To guard her virtue
this woman
resorts
to needless stratagems
and evasions.

She doesn't
realize
her face
is ample
defence.

He can also perpetuate, with a coy archness that seems out of character, some of the weakest jokes that can ever have been given the shape of verse:

He lifted up the hem
of her dress
but being intellectual
and something of a painter
he quickly let it fall
again, saying
with an abruptness
that dismayed her:
I never did care
for Van Dycks.

It is, of course, something that Layton should have practiced a modicum of self-criticism by making a selection at all, but his editing is perfunctory and eccentric. He 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, without necessarily producing more than a chunk of coloured prose chopped into lines or a doggerel jingle; when he cannot write a poem on a theme that stirs his emotions, he produces one of these hybrid verse compositions. With the curious purblindness that afflicts people possessed of such facile gifts, he seems unable to realize that his good poems are something quite different from his bad verse, and defends both with equal vigour.

By a convincing exhibition of his ferocity as a ring-tailed roarer in the little zoo of Canadian letters, Layton has in fact successfully embarrassed most of the critics into a kind of numbed evasiveness. In the seven years since I have been editing *Canadian Literature*, while two or three reviewers have made brief forays with bows-and-arrows into the fringes of Layton territory, no critic has submitted a complete and satisfactory study of Layton as poet, mainly because no critic has so far relished the task of considering a body of work by a notoriously irascible writer which varies so remarkably from the atrocious to the excellent, and which shows a failure of self-evaluation as monstrous as that displayed by D. H. Lawrence, who in so many ways resembled, anticipated and influenced

Layton. 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.

TO BEGIN, one has to re-unite the poet and the public figure whom I found myself dividing from each other in my oriental journey through Layton's *Collected Poems*. When a writer so undoubtedly good in his better manifestations as Layton takes a certain view of himself, and develops a life style in accordance with it, one ignores the fact in the last analysis at peril to one's criticism's completeness. "It's all in the manner," as Layton says:

Manner redeemeth everything:
redeemeth
man, sets him among,
over, the other worms, puts
a crown on him, yes, the size of a
mountain lake,
dazzling more dazzling!
than a slice of sun

From the beginning, Layton shows a romantic absorption with the poet as personality as well as with the poetry he produces. He sees himself as the vehicle of the divine frenzy of inspiration.

I wait
for the good lines
to come . . .

When the gods
begin
to batter me
I shall howl
like a taken
virgin.

And the writing of poetry involves for him not only a kind of inspirational possession, but also other elements of the magical vocation of the shaman; particularly joy and power:

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.

Possession, indeed, gives the poet a special, privileged status; he is different from other men, and his powers bring responsibilities that go beyond the mere production of good poems. He is the prophet, the philosopher, the leader of thought, and Shelley's unacknowledged legislators of the world are never far from one's mind when one reads Layton talking in this vein, as he does in the Foreword to the *Collected Poems*. The poet, he tells us, has a "prophetic vocation to lead his fellow men towards sanity and light." But it is precisely this vocation which turns the poet into the misunderstood and persecuted rebel-martyr with whom Layton identifies himself.

A poet is someone who has a strong sense of self and feels his life to be meaningful. By insisting on that self and refusing to become the socialized article that bureaucrats, priests, rabbis and so-called educators approve of, the poet offends the brainwashed millions who are the majority in any country. His words, his free manner of living, are a constant irritation to the repressed, the fearful, the self-satisfied, and the incurious. His refusing to wear the hand-me-down clothes of outworn philosophies and creeds; his resolve to see the world afresh and to see it from his own personal angle; his wry, unsleeping awareness of the ambiguities, the dark subtleties that plague the human soul; these will always make him suspect to the conformist taxpayer and his pitchmen in the universities and the churches.

I applaud Layton's desire to flout conformity and attack its supporters, and if this were all I would gladly stand shouting beside him. But I cannot see any necessary connection between rebellion of this kind and the vocation of the poet. That vocation, surely, is no more than to write poetry, and a good poet can even stand for insanity and darkness, as Yeats sometimes did, can even retreat into the darkness of literal insanity, and still continue his vocation. The social and moral rebel is something different, though the two may be and often are united. Layton takes it for granted that they *must* be united; this, to be necessarily paradoxical, is the classic romantic stance, and Layton, in upholding it, is a traditional wild man according to conventions laid down early in the nineteenth century. His essential neo-romanticism crops up in many other ways: in his "anti-literary" stance when his poems are as crammed with literary and classical tags and allusions as the prose of any despised man-of-letters; in his "anti-academic" attitude

when, unlike many of his fellow writers in Canada, he is a university graduate who — as his poems about lectures and students show — has been lurking for years in the underbrush of the academic groves. It manifests itself also in the archaic images and phrases which embellish even Layton's most recent poems with an undeniable tinge of antique poeticism. In the final pages of the *Collected Poems* one finds him talking of

The shadowy swaying of trees
Like graceful nuns in a forbidden dance;
The yearning stillness of an ended night . . . ;

telling us of his meeting with a faun (predictably conceived to point up the evils of a conformist world); and ending the volume with lines that are heavy with nostalgic echoes from the past of English romanticism:

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*.

There is, of course, nothing intrinsically wrong in using again the phrases and images I have italicized; they belong to the accumulated stock-in-trade of poets in the same way as Shakespeare and Sheridan belong to the accumulated stock-in-trade of actors, and the way they are used is what matters most. But the fact that Layton not only acts but often writes as a latter-day romantic becomes important when we grapple with the relation between the two levels of his poetic activity.

The concept of the romantic poet provides, to begin, a justification for Layton's Saint Sebastian attitude. In fact, it is nothing more than a logical extension of the illogical idea of the poet as prophet; if the poet is really inspired, if it is really the gods (whatever they represent) who make him howl, then he is one of the chosen, against whom criticism or even competition is not merely an act of presumption but also something very near to religious persecution. Such an attitude cannot simply be waved away. Layton is talking with conviction and passion when he says that if the poet "offers his hand in friendship and love, he must expect someone will try to chop it off at the shoulder." He feels his isolation as a poet and a man deeply, so deeply that it has inspired not only such malicious attacks on his fellow poets as figure in the "Prologue to the Long Pea-Shooter"²

² "But if you have the gifts of Reaney/
You may help your verse by being zany,
Or write as bleakly at a pinch/
As Livesay, Smith, and Robert Finch;
And be admired for a brand-new pot/
If you're as empty as Marriott;
I'll say nothing about Dudek:
The rhyme's too easy — speck or wreck . . ."

but also such a powerful vision of the fate of the rebel in the world of conformity as "The Cage". More than that, this feeling plays its ultimate part in the compassionate self-identification with the destroyed innocents of the animal and human worlds which inspires those of his poems that touch nearest to greatness and which pleads pardon for his arrogance towards his peers.

But there is another side to the idea of poetic inspiration. If it is blasphemous for others to criticize what the poet has written in the fine fury of possession, may it not also be an act of *hubris* for the poet himself to reject or diminish the godly gift? The whole vision of the poet as prophet denies not only the function of the critic; more seriously, it deprives the poet of the self-critical faculty which in all artistic activity is the necessary and natural balance to the irrational forces of the creative impulse. Once a poet sees himself as a vehicle for anything outside him, whether he calls it God or the Muse or Truth or, in Layton's words, "sanity and light", he abdicates the power of rational choice, and it is only logical that he should cease to discriminate between his best and his worst works, that he should seriously publish, in the same retrospective collection, a poem like *The Predator*, where pity and anger magnificently coalesce in the final verses:

Ghost of small fox,
hear me, if you're hovering close
and watching this slow red trickle of your blood:

Man sets even
more terrible traps for his own kind.
Be at peace; your gnawed leg will be well-revenged . . .

and a joking jingle, like *Diversion*, of a kind which any versifier might whip up at two for a dollar.

Whenever I'm angry with her
or hold up my hand to slap or hit,
my darling recites some lines I've writ.

The crafty puss! She thinks that she
diverts my anger by vanity,
when it's her heaving breasts that does it.

If the lines she recites are anything like these, the breasts of Mr. Layton's darling must put on a very spectacular exhibition!

BUT NOTHING IS SO SIMPLE where Proteus is involved. The problem of Layton's switchback career as a poet, which makes one's reactions to his *Collected Poems* take the form of a wildly dipping and climbing seismograph, cannot be solved merely by suggesting that he is deliberately unselective or incapable of selection. That might be argued for a poet whose successes, when they came, were obviously the product of deep irrational urges which rarely and unexpectedly broke into the dull cycle of an undistinguished existence and produced a masterpiece that astonished its creator; there have, very occasionally, been such writers, but Layton is not one of them. On the contrary, on reading the *Collected Poems*, one is left with the impression of having been in the company of a trained and versatile craftsman liable to sudden fits of contempt for his public, in which he tries to palm off on them fragments of worn-out fustian instead of lengths of silk.

Perhaps the matter can be made clearer by bringing in an illustration from another field of art, and comparing Layton with Picasso. There is a verse at the end of his poem, "Joseph K", which suggests that he will not find the comparison offensive.

Then let him rise like a hawk.
Fiercely. A blazing chorus
Be, or like a painting by Picasso
Drawing energy from its own contours.

Picasso, to my mind, connotes enormous energy, and a flexible craftsmanship which has enabled him to paint and draw in many styles, and to select and use ruthlessly from past forms of art anything that might suit his purposes. No modern painter has spread such magnificent confusion, by the display of his talents, among those academic critics who originally damned the post-impressionists with the argument that they knew neither how to draw nor to paint. At the same time, as the collection of second-line material enshrined in the museum at Antibes has shown, Picasso's very energy has led him to produce a great many minor works which a more fastidious artist would have discarded or kept as mere exercises. Finally, there has always been a touch of the clown about Picasso, as became very evident in at least one of the films in which he performed as the impresario of his own art. 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 or fox his public. But it would be foolish to assume that because of this Picasso is nothing more than a mountebank.

In one sense at least Irving Layton cannot be compared with Picasso. Picasso

was the moving spirit in a trend that revolutionized our views of art, and it is hard now to imagine what painting would have been like anywhere in the world if he had not lived. So far there is no evidence of any real revolution that Layton had led in poetry; his work at its best has its own originality, but it breaks into no really new territory, and his followers among the younger Canadian poets have so far shown neither the vigour nor the talents of their master. In other respects, however, the resemblances between Layton and Picasso are striking. Layton, too, is an artist of great energy — in terms of quantity alone a formidable producer. And, like Picasso, he combines the ability to work in a variety of styles and to borrow freely from the past with a craftsmanship which at its best is so good that one cannot possibly attribute his worst productions to the mere inability to do better. A different explanation has to be found.

Let us hold the comparison at this point for the moment so as to consider the versatility which, from the earliest examples published in the *Collected Poems*, characterizes Layton's art. He is adept at the lyrically descriptive vignette:

The afternoon foreclosing, see
The swimmer plunges from his raft,
Opening the spray corollas by his act of war —
The snake heads strike
Quickly and are silent.

He can make a compassionate statement in well-turned verse of almost Marvellian grace and graciousness, as in "Mrs. Fornheim, Refugee", his small elegy for a former language student who died of cancer.

I taught you Shakespeare's tongue, not knowing
The time and manner of your going;
Certainly if with ghosts to dwell,
German would have served as well.
Voyaging lady, I wish for you
An Englishwoman to talk to,
An unruffled listener,
And green words to say to her.

He presents, on occasion, mordant examples of epigrammatic wit, quite different from the snickering jokes of some of his later poems; "Lady Enfield", for example:

Be reckless in your loving,
Her grace makes no one poor
For only bullets issue
From such an iron whore.

And he shows a fine adeptness in that admirable practice game of the young poet, the parody.

Although I have written
 of venery
(and of men's hates, too, my masters!)
and of the sun, the best thing in the cosmos,
for it warms my bones
now I am old and no woman
 will lie with me
 seeing how wrinkled
my hams are, and my bones decrepit . . .

In this early Layton the craftsmanship is usually careful and deliberate: at times, even, almost excessively precise and mannered:

The passive motion of sand
Is fluid geometry. Fir needles
Are the cool, select thoughts
Of madmen; and
Like a beggar the wind wheedles
Pine cones from the pines.

Here Layton appears as a young man trying very hard and often very successfully to write well in an idiom derived largely from the English Twenties and Thirties. Later, as he turned away from this source of influence and began to feel his place within an American rather than a British tradition (in so far as his militant individualism allowed him to feel part of any tradition), he expressed his dislike of Auden and presented Eliot as something of an anti-poet ("a zeal for poetry without zest,/ without marrow juices;/ at best, a single hair/ from the beard of Dostoevsky"). But, though there are obvious temperamental reasons why he should in the long run have reacted against both Auden and Eliot, the lingering — if diminishing — echoes of their styles which sound throughout the *Collected Poems* make it clear that Layton, whose eclecticism is — though he might resent the suggestion — one of his virtues as a writer, learnt all he could from them before he rejected them. Without such predecessors, he would hardly have written lines like these:

Your face
tilts towards the gay edifice
through whose casements
birds might go in and out;

and your elbow is,
to be sure,
a gesture that makes known
your will — yet hardly more;
the flexures of your breast and skirt
turn like an appetite also there.

Evident from the beginning, among the experimental styles and often borrowed manners of the earlier poems, is an unfailing vitality and inventiveness. When Layton forgets to argue, when he lets his fancy go, and then holds it to its course with the reins of careful technique, we get his best work. It can be as luminously coloured and dreamlike as a painting by Chagall.

To the movement then of dark and light
A Byzantine angel slid down from the smoky wall
Hovering over me with his wings outstretched —
But I saw the shape where the flat tiles were not —
Before I could make a salt out of my astonishment
There was a meadow of surf in the bay at my elbow
And while the hungry robins picked at the air
White blossoms fell on their sad faces
Held in a frame of grass and ground for sentimental poets
Who weep when they are told of such things.

And at another time it can combine those two strong Laytonian elements, the pastoral and the apocalyptic, in a vision of the natural world as concentrated and intense as “Halos at Lac Marie Louise”.

Presently I heard a stir
Of flying crows that came
And spread themselves against the sky
Like a black plume.

One like a detached feather,
Falling westward, stranded
On the topmost prong of a tree.
The tree was dead.

It was a white skeleton
Of a tree ominously gnarled;
And around the singular crow
The stark crows whirled.

The heaven split, the dark rain
Fell on the circling hills;
The thick gouts dropped beside the oars
Like melting skulls.

The boat fell with the waves
Into a still opening;
The halo of green hills became
A black pronged ring.

With the growing assurance of Layton's later phases comes a limbering of the rather stiff rhythms which mar some of the earlier poems, and this change is one of the liberating elements in his more interesting works, in the sparkling fluency of that extraordinary erotic fantasia, "The Day Aviva Came to Paris", and, on a completely different level, in the questioning sombreness of "Fornalutx", a ballad of disappointment with a Spanish town.

Who thought of the heat-stained cobblestones?
The damned who shuffled on the street?
And cheeks made pallid by a vile sun,
And rotting matter under one's feet.

Even in "Fornalutx" one sees, at least to a degree, the negative aspect of the greater assurance with which Layton has written as the years have gone by. The verse is inclined to be loose rather than limber, careless rather than carefree. A little more work, one feels, and it could have been a much more concentrated and more effective poem. But "Fornalutx" has still, within its limitations, something to say. Many of the other poems which Layton has written in recent years are not merely slipshod; they are also pointless — superficial versicles, empty jests, malicious, misfiring jibes. Layton recently expressed his annoyance with a critic who had accused him of favouring "a loose, slapdash style of writing". Perhaps he does not deliberately *favour* such a style, but he undoubtedly uses it on occasion. How else can one describe some of the bad poems I have already quoted?

Here one returns to the central comparison with Picasso. If we dismiss the Philistine explanations, that the poet cannot write any better, or does not know the difference between good and bad writing, how are we to explain the fact that Layton persists in publishing verses which he knows the critics will condemn, and often condemn with justification? As in the case of Picasso, I think the explanation is to be found in the relationship between Peter and Petrushka, between the poet-prophet and the romantic clown. In a fine poem which greatly illu-

minates his attitude towards his own role, he begins with the title statement, "Whatever else poetry is freedom", and, having thus taken license, presents himself as the clown of such freedom.

... And now I balance on wooden stilts and dance
 And thereby sing to the loftiest casements.
 See how with polish I bow from the waist.
 Space for these stilts! More space or I fail!

And a crown I say for my buffoon's head . . .

And I know myself undone who am a clown
 And wear a wreath of mist for a crown . . .

THE ROMANTIC IDEA OF POETRY as "freedom" suggests that the poet should be liberated from any limits his own conscious craftsmanship or the requirements of the critics may impose (thus bringing us back in a disguised circle to the idea of the poet as the vehicle of an inspiration which it is blasphemous to criticize) and it establishes the reign of Saturn in which the respectable, the acknowledged, the established shall all be brought down, and all standards of behaviour (poetic in this case) shall be disregarded. The clown becomes the king in this Saturnalia; there is a curious fantasy poem in which Layton imagines two poets entering Toronto at the end of a Christmas parade and thinking the cheers and the civic welcome are for them.

But the acclaiming thunders
 Were all for a clown . . .

It is unnecessary to identify the clown-hero; Layton does it in those poems in which he deliberately exaggerates what he imagines other people say or think of him, and in the process presents the figure of the traditional comic ugly man.

Who is this butcher, you ask,
 with his nose
 broken and twisted
 like a boxer's?

Look, you exclaim,
 at the mat of hair
 that covers his neck
 and his heavy gait
 like that of a startled bruin's (*sic*) . . .

In romantic tradition the clown represents rebellion against human conventions; he suffers from his fellows, but he has also the privilege of flouting and playing tricks on them, and it is under this mask that Layton presents those of his poems which, according to any recognizable criterion of quality must be rejected, but which he demands should be heard in the name of the poet's sacred freedom.

The figure of the clown is related to two other of Layton's *personae*, the lover and the misanthrope. Layton's erotic poems — which do not compose so large a proportion of his work as he and his detractors have conspired to make us believe — must be taken seriously, but not solemnly. For Layton sex is a matter of comedy, of joy and zest and sometimes of laughter as loud as that of Apuleius or Rabelais. He recognizes the paradox of its glory and its absurdity, that the gods have so made man

. . . that when he sighs
In ecstasy between a woman's thighs
He goes up and down, a bicycle pump . . .

Today it is our older, or at least our middle-aged poets who in Canada write best about sex — Layton, Purdy, Birney. They lack the lugubrious solemnity with which the younger writers cloddishly trample with rough cries in the obsessive dance of Venus.

This is not to say that Layton's erotic poems — any more than his other works — are uniformly successful. Some are shockers, though Layton has much less of a predilection for four-letter words than his legend suggests; some are boastful . . .

Hell, my back's sunburnt
from so much love-making
in the open air.

But others, like "Song for a Late Hour", have a marvellous singing lyricism:

No one told me
to beware your bracelets,
the winds I could expect
from your small breasts.
No one told me
the tumult of your hair.
When a lock touched me
I knew the sensations
of shattering glass.

And some of the best are those in which the eroticism is not obvious, but which in tender sadness explore the complexity of human relationships that spring from the early raptures of love. "Berry Picking" is a particularly good example. The poet watches his wife picking berries, and reflects on the changes marriage has brought in her attitude; now he can only "vex and perplex" her.

So I envy the berries she puts in her mouth,
The red and succulent juice that stains her lips;
I shall never taste that good to her, nor will they
Displease her with a thousand barbarous jests.

Now they lie easily for her to take,
Part of the unoffending world that is hers;
Here beyond complexity she stands and stares
And leans her marvellous head as if for answers.

No more the easy soul my childish craft deceives
Nor the simpler one for whom yes is always yes;
No, now her voice comes to me from a far way off
Though her lips are redder than the raspberries.

In poems like this the comic view of sex is suffused with darkness, and the mood merges into the tragic view which Layton, clown and prophet alike, takes of Man, the creature whose own flaws destroy him. Here moralist and misanthrope come together in Layton as they did in Swift; the suffering poet, victim and thus exemplar of human perfidy, joins them. Beginning with the old radical ideals of brotherhood and, to use his own words, "sanity and love", Layton suffers the radical's disillusionment. Man, as he is now, has damned himself by his rejection of life. The poet, who still stands for life, must retreat into solitude.

Enter this tragic forest where the trees
Uprear as if for the graves of men,
All function and desire to offend
With themselves finally done;
And mark the dark pines farther on,
The sun's fires touching them at will,
Motionless like silent khans
Mourning serene and terrible
Their Lord entombed in the blazing hill.

At its height, as in "The Improved Binoculars", Layton's rejection of humanity in his time and world reaches the level of apocalyptic vision, where he sees a city

in flames and all its inhabitants seeking not merely to save themselves but also to profit from the delightful fact that their fellows are suffering.

And the rest of the populace, their mouths
distorted by an unusual gladness, bawled thanks
to this comely and ravaging ally, asking

Only for more light with which to see
their neighbour's destruction.

In this world of apocalypse, the poet appears as victim, slaughtered by the well-bred and cultured killer in a scene of Kafkaesque politeness and malice ("The Executioner").

Here he becomes identified with all those victims of man, and particularly those innocents of the animal world, for whom his compassion issues in a series of remarkable poems, "The Bull Calf"; "Cat Dying in Autumn", "The Predator". To my mind, "The Bull Calf" is not only one of Layton's best poems; it is also one of the most moving poems of our generation. The calf, only just born, yet shapely, full of pride and "the promise of sovereignty", must be slaughtered because, as the farmer says, there is "No money in bull calves". A clergyman sighs, and the murder follows.

Struck,
the bull calf drew in his thin 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, stiffly,
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 cool pit,
I turned away and wept.

It is not only the animal world in its suffering that Layton celebrates with such eloquent compassion. He dedicates it also to those men and women who in some way show, in misfortune, qualities of dignity and feeling that place them outside the herd of hostile humanity: to the idiot who shames him by showing a pitiful understanding of a dog's suffering ("The Imbecile"); to an old crippled man defying his fate as "Death's frail, quixotic antagonist" ("Ballad of the Old Spaniard"); and, in one of his most complexly haunting poems ("Das Wahre Ich"), as a Jew to a woman who was once a Nazi.

The terrible stillness holds us both
and stops our breath
while I wonder, a thrill stabbing into my mind:
"At this moment, does she see my crumpled form against
the wall,
blood on my still compassionate eyes and mouth?"

In fine, Layton is a poet in the old romantic sense, a *Dichter*, flamboyant, rowdy, angry, tortured, tender, versatile, voluble, ready for the occasion as well as the inspiration, keeping his hand constantly in, and mingling personal griefs and joys with the themes and visions of human destiny. Lately a somewhat negative element seems to have entered his poems; he is conscious of time beginning to sap the sources of life, he adjusts reluctantly to his own aging, he dwells on the unhappier aspects of sex, suspicious of the infidelity of women, of the untrustworthiness of friends. He is obviously at a point of transition, but his vigour will carry him over this and other weirs. Whatever happens, we shall have to take Layton as he comes and wishes, the good and the bad together; but that is better than not having him at all. For my last feeling, after journeying through Asia with Layton in the form of his *Collected Poems*, was that of having been in the disturbing company of one of the men of my generation who will not be forgotten.