Myths of Montreal: Irving Layton, Jewish Thematics and the Mainstream

by Norman Ravvin

Jewish Canadian writing in English came into its own in the late 1940s and early 1950s with major contributions by A.M. Klein, McClelland & Stewart's publication of Henry Kreisel's *The Rich Man*, a Governor General's award for Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice,* and the early work of Mordecai Richler. In 1956, William Carlos Williams, the paradigmatic American modernist, added his imprimatur to Irving Layton's growing prestige and influence by providing the introduction to Layton's *The Improved Binoculars*. In it, he characterized Layton as a poet with "an unrivaled choice of words." "When I first clapped eyes on the poems of Irving Layton," Williams wrote, "I let out a yell of joy" (Williams n.p.). Layton's work in small press publishing immersed him in the most up-to-date trends in independent Canadian literature, and in this he was a founding figure of Canada's postwar literary ethos. But his growing influence did not lead to a straightforward creative relationship to Jewish themes and recent Jewish history. Unlike Klein, who moved back and forth between what might be dubbed 'Jewish materials' and more mainstream Canadian subject matter, Layton's early poetry is notable for its scant attention to things Jewish, and for the tone he chose when taking on material connected with his youth, the world of his parents, and Montreal's immigrant streets. Furthermore, the number of poems in his work of the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s directly related to war in Europe and its devastation is slight.

In this, Layton's approach reflects the English language literary scene in the decade and a half following World War Two. In those years, while Yiddish writers applied great energy to efforts of recovery and memorialization, and while young European writers such as Primo Levi and Tadeusz Borowski embarked on breakthrough books of autobiography and fiction, North American writers—at remove physically, and, just as importantly, intent on joining a non-Jewish literary mainstream—moved only gradually toward a confident literary response to the war. Young Jewish writers confronted a range of challenges that were specific to the children of an immigrant community: how should one represent a generation against which

one was defining oneself; in what way could the language of that world—in this case Yiddish—inform contemporary writing; how might this material be brought to bear in work meant for a broad audience of Jews and non-Jews? In the case of Jewish writers beginning their careers in the wake of the Holocaust, a set of more troubling questions loomed, even if they were only vaguely evident at the time: what was one's relationship to the European disaster; what was one's ethical position, as a writer in relation to such events; how could such demanding issues be made relevant for the average reader amidst the prosperity and relative normality of postwar Canada?

In a few often-anthologized early poems, Layton does address his upbringing on the mean streets of Montreal's working-class Jewish quarter, where in many homes, including Layton's, an old-world ethos prevailed. According to Layton, his father was what was commonly known as a *luftmensch*, "a scholar and a recluse" who made him feel, "though he said very few words to [his son]," that "there was another world that was inviolable and much more beautiful" (Sherman). Layton's poem "Death of Moishe Lazarovitch," composed after his father's death, is evocative of this, suggesting that this unprepossessing man's corpse emanated a "bright light / Like a tall post that had caught the sun's ray."[1] "I don't know," he writes

> how they lifted him up
> Or held the vessel near their mourning silk,
> But their going was like a roar of flames
> And Matter sang in my ears like poured milk.
> (32)

The son, a self-declared atheist and leftist, recognized something semi-miraculous in death. However evasive and distant the father was, there is weight and great effect in this scene portraying the elder Lazarovitch as he is taken from his family.

Layton's youth straddles the decline of the old Yiddish-speaking downtown and the rise of postwar suburban reality that arrived, quite suddenly, offering new options for Jewish identity, professional and educational. In early poems, the city's downtown Jewish streets offer themselves as a distinctly grotesque and pathetic milieu. The title of "Jewish Main Street," first published in 1944, signals the work's link to Layton's childhood spent near St. Lawrence Boulevard, known then as 'the Main':

> And first, the lamp-posts whose burning match-heads
> Scatter the bog fires on the wet streets;

Then the lights from auto and store window
That flake cool and frothy in the mist
Like a beaten colloid.
In this ghetto's estuary
Women with offspring appraise
The solemn hypocrisies of fish
That gorp on trays of blue tin . . .
They enter the shops
And haggle for a dead cow's rump.

Old Jews with memories of pogroms
Shuffle across menacing doorways;
They go fearfully, quietly;
They do not wish to disturb
The knapsack of their sorrows.

O here each anonymous Jew
Clutches his ration book
For the minimum items of survival
Which honoured today—who knows?—
Tomorrow some angry potentate
Shall declare null and void.

(9)

A few streets east of the Main, De Bullion Street was known as the centre of Montreal's red light district, but in the early part of the twentieth century, including the early years of Layton's childhood, it was part of the Jewish neighbourhood. His father's synagogue stood there, a dwelling Layton describes in his memoir, *Waiting for the Messiah*, as a "rundown slum domicile," "a dwelling that could just as well have been used as a whorehouse," which was what was on view when Jews exited the place (27). Layton found himself back on De Bullion after high school, living there alone, learning to make his way as a teacher and writer, with a view of the area's final, struggling years as a Jewish neighbourhood. The mid-forties poem, "De Bullion Street," offers the following portrait:

Here private lust is public gain and shame;
Here the Oriental and the skipjack go;
Where those bleak outposts of the virtuous
The corner mission and the walled church grow
Like hæmorrhoids on the city's anus.

O reptilian street whose scaly limbs
Are crooked stairways and the grocery store,
Isolate, is your dreaming half-shut eye:
Each virgin at the barricaded door
Feels your tongue-kiss like a butterfly.
(11)

In these poems the downtown is no site of nostalgic longing, but a source of disdain and shame. Not only was it *luftmenschland*, but the haven of Jews broken by their past, which Layton cleverly dubs their "knapsack of sorrows" ("Jewish Main Street" 9). In his poems of the 1940s and '50s Layton made only rare comment regarding Jewish history and identity. A.M. Klein took note of this in a 1945 review of Layton's first book, *Here and Now*, complaining, amidst otherwise glowing appreciation of Layton's "fine literary skill," that it "is regrettable" that the poet's Jewish heritage "is the theme only of two of the poems published in this volume, one of which is unworthy of inclusion" (Klein 213, 215).

The suburbs are a repeated motif and target of satire in Layton's poetry in the 1950s, representing for him the shallowness and materialism of post-war Canadian life. In the poetic prologue to his 1954 volume *The Long Pea-Shooter* he informs his reader that

[…] our neighbours get their creed
From the latest comic strip they read
(Though kind, they're dumb—they come no dumber!)
You can spoof them winter, spring, and summer.
(9)

This theme recurs in his 1959 Governor General's Award-winning volume *A Red Carpet for the Sun*, though in more effective literary form. "Early Morning in Côte St. Luc" begins "under the willow tree," but sets its sights on a "grey steam shovel," which is poised to prepare "an easy way out / for excrement" (52). The neighbourhood's Jewish population sets the poet wondering:

How to make room
in my mind for these
and the black bitter men –
my kin –
the inconsolable, the far-seeing?

In the foreword to his 1963 volume *Balls for a One-Armed Juggler*, the contemporary poet is characterized by his limited role as "a picturesque rebel or a colourful bohemian who livens up the parties of jaded suburbanites" (xx). Ironically, in 1950, Layton and his young wife had moved to Montreal's prototypic postwar suburb, Côte St. Luc—the place many downtown Jews chose when they left older homes closer to the city centre. But Layton felt no compunction regarding his urge to lampoon his suburban neighbours. He remained there, at 8035 Kildare Road, writing his anti-suburban rants and manifestos, in a new split-level, aluminum-sided house in the heart of a Jewish community, until 1958.

Though Layton's literary reputation was entirely based on his poetry, in the early decades of his career he devoted a reasonable amount of creative energy to short story writing. In prose work published in the late 1940s and fifties, Jewish daily life in Montreal plays a central and revealing role. These stories have attracted little critical or readerly interest, yet they are a rich resource for a discussion of how Jewish themes motivated Layton in these decades. Layton's 1961 collection *The Swinging Flesh* highlighted his stories, the most notable of which are titled "The English Lesson" and "Mrs. Polinov." They span a decade in Layton's output, the former having appeared in 1945 in the mimeographed magazine *First Statement*, while "Mrs. Polinov" was published a decade later in American poet Cid Corman's influential magazine *Origin.* The bulk of *The Swinging Flesh*—some 135 of its 189 pages—is devoted to fiction, reflecting Layton's urge to stake out the prose territory that critics and readers had not come to expect from him. Reviews of *The Swinging Flesh* were lukewarm, and reviewers—for the most part non-Jewish writers—tended to apply generalities to the stories rather than directly address what they revealed about Jewish cultural identity. Phyllis Webb, who encountered Layton when she lived in Montreal in the middle fifties, found the stories "neither technically nor stylistically interesting," though she felt they exposed "a world which most Canadians would never had guessed existed" (117). This is a world, as Webb puts it, "populated by Montreal Jews, Marxists, European immigrants, and other inhabitants of the Province of Quebec" (117). As Webb describes it, the Province of Quebec might as well be the Planet Mars, and her commentary manages to miss the crucial material that Layton reveals in his stories, material he presents in edgier detail than in his poetry. Among his contemporaries it was the poet-critic Eli Mandel who came closest to appreciating the stories' contribution, pointing out how they express what Mandel calls Layton's "radical 'social' criticism" (Mandel 123).

The average reader and most critics, less savvy than Mandel, would have found little in English-Canadian literature to help them appreciate the nature of Layton's "social criticism." He is at work, in his stories, on a mode of immigrant literature that had hardly taken shape. Canadian writing of a similar tenor had appeared from Henry Kreisel in the late 1940s, and then from Adele Wiseman in her 1956 novel *The Sacrifice*, but critics did not recognize the links between Layton's scenarios of postwar Montreal urban Jewish life and those of Kreisel and Wiseman of Toronto and the Prairies. Neither were they especially interested in themes associated with the Holocaust, with the abandonment of Yiddish, and the Jewish desertion of the downtown precinct in favour of the suburbs.

"The English Lesson" is a story of pre-World War Two Montreal immigrant life. Told from the point of view of an English teacher named Excelsior Griffiths, it depicts an evening visit by a middle-aged student, Mrs. Webber, whom Layton portrays as an archetypal trapped immigrant wife. Brought from Lithuania by her aunt, and then indentured for her "ship's money," Mrs. Webber is the story's centre of sympathy, admiring her teacher's "edjication" and "nawlich," which are, in her European view, the way up in society (63). The story ends dramatically, with the appearance of Mrs. Webber's husband, a figure out of a Grimm's fairy tale, who makes himself heard by way of "loud thumping at the door" before bursting in on teacher and student (68). This story, like others in *The Swinging Flesh*, appeared in a little magazine, the kind of venue open to Layton's brand of "radical 'social' criticism" of the immigrant experience.

"Mrs. Polinov," a stranger but better story, is more explicitly autobiographical. Upon its appearance in 1955, the Holocaust had received direct attention in A.M. Klein's novel, *The Second Scroll*, but had not become a common subject in English language literature in Canada. Layton was himself immersed in the Holocaust survivor community, which had begun arriving in Montreal in 1948. He met his share of newcomers, whether in suburban Côte St. Luc or through his job teaching English and literature to newcomers at Montreal's Jewish Public Library. During these years the Jewish Public Library was located in the old downtown on Esplanade Avenue, which overlooks Mount Royal. In his memoir, *Waiting for the Messiah*, Layton writes that after the war he found himself "teaching English to Holocaust survivors of Hitler's death camps" (246).[2] The Jewish Public Library became an important cultural and social hub for these survivor immigrants. "Mrs. Polinov" is told from the point of view of Brebner, a poet teaching English to newcomers at what the narrator refers to as "the

Library"—where the librarian features his volume of poetry on her desk in order to inspire "trust in his ability as a teacher" (71).

A student named Mrs. Polinov catches Brebner after class and informs him, as he escorts her home, that she "just wanted to spik with" him. "I have nodding," she says, "to say you" (73). Here Layton is up against a challenge that arose in the earliest English language Jewish American novels: how to portray poorly spoken English without reverting to pigeon English of ethnic stereotype. His strategy on this front—a good one, though somewhat challenging for narrative reliability—is to acknowledge when the story's characters shift into Yiddish. "I'll spik you in Yiddish," offers Mrs. Polinov. "You understand Yiddish?" To which Brebner says one word: "Yes" (73). But how freighted that one affirmative word is with the whole "knapsack of sorrows," if you will, with its ability to reveal the hardscrabble downtown Yiddish-speaking youth of Layton's alter ego, the necessary abandonment of it all in order to Canadianize, and the weird, almost uncanny eruption of his childhood milieu on Montreal's streets after 1948, when Holocaust survivors began to arrive in the city in large numbers and renewed the European character of the local culture.

The latter half of "Mrs. Polinov" consists of an encounter between Brebner, Mrs. Polinov and her husband, which takes place in Yiddish at the Polinovs' flat. The point of Brebner's visit is not made entirely clear, but the narrative outcome, for Layton, is the collision of a Canadian-raised Jew with the Polinovs' Holocaust story. The view held by survivors after the war was that established Canadians did not necessarily want to hear their stories, so Layton's story is an antidote to this, an idiosyncratic and contrary portrait. Just as Mrs. Polinov has in some way brought herself to Brebner's attention, her wartime story turns on incidents when her youthful attractiveness bought favour from the German oppressor. Brebner recognizes that he is another figure in a social hierarchy—in this case the Canadianized up-and-comers—whom Mrs. Polinov must please.

The heart of "Mrs. Polinov" is the wartime narrative Brebner is told, which includes a graphic depiction of a wartime massacre in Chelm, Mrs. Polinov's usefulness to the Germans, the wife's escape from a boxcar bound for Auschwitz, and the couple's reliance on the Polish underground to gain the papers and connections necessary to live out the rest of the war hiding in plain site as non-Jewish Poles. The story is ahead of its time in the English language tradition in a number of ways. Who, in the middle fifties, expected to open a magazine and read how a young Jew felt upon returning to his town following a massacre? Who talked openly about the "grey zone" of survival, a phenomenon explored in Primo Levi's later

work, which included elements of collusion, barter and practical interaction between victim and oppressor? Who, outside the survivor community, knew the flavour of the bitter ethical conundrums associated with the willingness to ask of another, "*Why was this man spared?*" (79)

In 1955, in an American little magazine, Layton's story must have seemed like cryptic letter from the underground. And when the story reappeared, in 1961, in *The Swinging Flesh*, critics such as Webb and Layton's once-compatriot Louis Dudek were ineffectual in their response to the collection's short fiction. Dudek's 1961 review has nothing to say about the stories beyond the fact that the book "consists of a hundred and fifty pages of prose (short stories alas)" (122). The reception of Layton's short fiction tells us interesting things about the reception of certain kinds of Jewish Canadian literature in this period. Hardly anyone in the Canadian literary mainstream would have recognized Mrs. Polinov and her husband. And those who had experienced similar disasters in Eastern Europe were still reading their literature in Yiddish and other European languages.

In the sixties, mainstream Jewish identity pushed increasingly toward the Holocaust as a second pillar of ethnic identity alongside that of Israel. Layton's poetry from this period tends to evade Holocaust-related themes, although the introductions, forewords and prologues he added to his collections point to the Holocaust, among other twentieth century calamities, as a subject poets should feel obliged to address. The foreword to *Balls for a One-Armed Juggler* is a manifesto on the role of the poet in the postwar era, in which Layton complains about the inability of poets to face the "terrible meanings imbedded in the human ash of death factories" (xviii). "Where is the poet," he asks, "who can make clear for us Belsen? [...][t]he utter wickedness of Nazism and National-Communism?" Lesser poets, Layton says, "continue bringing their posies into the swept courtyards of Auschwitz and Belsen" (xix). But the collection itself offers almost nothing directly dealing with the Holocaust. If his compatriots' efforts were not to his taste, Layton himself did not have the chops as of yet either.

In the 1970s Layton's collections are exemplified by the 1973 volume *Lovers and Lesser Men*. Layton was spending time on Greek islands, where the landscape and village life caught his imagination. Here he offers glimpses of his boyhood in *luftmenschland*: a poem called "The Benediction" recalls the Sabbath candles his mother blessed, whose flames danced "like little old men" (28). In a long poem called "Signs and Portents," referring to himself by his birth name, Israel, Layton considers the idea of the divine in light of his realization that "everything except / writing poems and making love ends up by finally boring me" (43). Only at the end of

Lovers and Lesser Men does Layton signal an engagement with contemporary Jewish themes, including Auschwitz and his contrarian view of Christianity, a tradition he describes as a "yawn" that has lasted "almost two thousand years" ("The Burning Bush" 96).

It is this link between Christian anti-Semitism and the Holocaust that became the focus of Layton's most sustained poetic commentary on twentieth-century Jewish life. The cover montage for his 1976 volume *For My Brother Jesus* introduces these themes in a manner that might strike readers today as kitsch. The foreground image is made up of one of the iconic photographs from the emptying of the Warsaw Ghetto, of a boy in a knee length coat and cap, raising his hands before armed Germans. Behind this image the designer placed a grand medieval European cathedral, while Jesus stands in the middle ground, wearing a Star of David on his robes. In the foreword to the volume Layton tells us that Christianity is founded

> neither on myth nor on fiction, but on an ignoble lie. That lie, trumpeted in churches, cathedrals, universities, mission schools, and Boy Scout rallies has been responsible for the cruel deaths of millions of innocent people by blazing faggot, sword, and hunger; most recently, by chemicals and mass executions. (xv-xvi)

Writers who ignore this fact, according to Layton, condemn themselves to "retelling fairy-tales" (xvi). And if one is to fully understand the Jewish post-Holocaust predicament, one must accept as well, as Layton puts it, that the "anti-sexuality, anti-life bias at the heart of Christianity contained in its terrible unfolding logic the extermination of six million human beings [...]" (xvi).

Layton was not alone in expressing these ideas, though he had a characteristic talent for expressing them in the most provocative way. Among the weighty epigrams at the outset of *For My Brother Jesus* he quotes the historian James Parkes, whose work on anti-Semitism and the Holocaust may have spurred Layton toward his poetic equation. Part of Layton's provocation is his goal of reclaiming "Jesus for the Jews as one of their greatest prophets" ("Foreword," *For My Brother Jesus* xv). This goal, one might argue, is not just a provocation to the non-Jew, but a challenge to Jews. In *For My Brother Jesus*, Layton's poetic persona chats amiably with carved images of Jesus in European cathedrals. He drops Yiddishisms and ironizes with his "brother Jesuha" as if he is hanging out on the Main, eating a smoked meat sandwich ("Incident" 72). The effect is haunting and a little nutty. Did Layton really care if Jesus was readmitted into the imagination of contemporary Jews as a prophet? Had he really thought through

what this sort of reordering of the tradition might mean? I cannot believe this is so. In a poem that makes high fun of Saint John the Baptist, Layton identifies himself as "an ironical Jew who looks out at the world / and its vicious madmen with cold appraising eyes / freed from the myths and fables our people invented / —monotheism, Christianity, Marxism […]" (107).

The poet's position gives the reader pause. Could it be that a review of *For My Brother Jesus*, published in *Maclean's* magazine, is correct in suggesting that watching Layton "flog the comatose horse of Christian hypocrisy breeds an uneasy feeling that he is addressing not his peers but the gallery? *Epater le bourgeois* sells books" ("Layton, the Lion" 64). *For My Brother Jesus* offered Layton and his publisher a publicity coup, which was among the last of his lengthy career. The book stands as Layton's most sustained commentary on Jewish history, though it reflects only a short, particularly stormy part of that career.

Irving Layton stepped away from Montreal's Jewish mean streets in search of literary modernism; he despised and lampooned Jewish postwar suburban success; and though he bewailed ignorance of the Holocaust in many of his volumes' prologues, the poems that followed these manifestos dealt with other twentieth century dilemmas. These seemingly contradictory positions reflect both the times and a more telling fact: for a Jew from the slums, making modern poetry in postwar Canada required defiance and the agility of a one-armed juggler.

Notes

1 Layton's collection *A Red Carpet for the Sun* is not paginated. Parenthetical references in the text of this essay include the entry number attached to the quoted poem.

2 In her *Irving Layton and His Works*, Wynne Francis suggests that Layton was teaching at the Jewish Public Library as early as 1940 (28). Certainly, in the late 1940s and early 1950s Layton was a regular instructor in the Library's Yiddish People's University (YIFO) run by the Yiddish writer Melech Ravitch. In 1950-51 Layton taught Ancient Greek Philosophy, History of Political Theory, About Modern Music, Intermediate English, and History of Canada (email corr. Shannon Hodge, July 10, 2012).

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