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Cruel Creatures: Layton's Animal Poems as a Response to the Holocaust

by Emily Essert

The majority of Irving Layton's poetry is strongly lyrical, and features an assertive poetic persona who does not hesitate to comment on humanity and its failings. Layton's poetic silence on the Holocaust during the 1950s and early 1960s is therefore a loud one. Given his frankness about other matters, his reticence on this issue seems out of character. It may be that the pressure to formulate an adequate response to the Holocaust was too intense, or that the events themselves were too earth-shattering. Whatever the reason, the Holocaust did not emerge as a major subject in his poetry until twenty years after it had ended. In one way, Layton's delay is unsurprising, given Theodor Adorno's dictum that "to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34). But because Layton's particular struggle to respond to the Holocaust has been insufficiently addressed by his critics, I want to offer an account of one aspect of that struggle.[1]

This account begins by considering references to the Holocaust in a few of Layton's very early poems. Those examples provide a background for my contention that some of Layton's poems of the later 1950s and early 1960s constitute an indirect response to the events of the Holocaust. I argue that, during this period, Layton frequently represented humans as animals, and depicted human violence toward animals in order to address the moral or philosophical question posed by those atrocities: should the fact that humans are capable of such intense and prolonged cruelty alter our understanding of the human species? A belief in humanity's similarity to other creatures offered Layton a possible answer. His animal imagery responds indirectly to the Holocaust by considering the moral issues—about human nature and the presence of evil in the universe—that emerged from those events. An adequate response to the Holocaust demands a rethinking of the notion of the human; for Layton, this had to begin with an acknowledgement of human animality. In other words, Layton's animal imagery provides evidence of his continual struggle to address the events and implications of the Holocaust in poetry.

Layton's publication record suggests that he felt compelled, from the outset of his career, to try to write a poem about the Holocaust. Among his earliest poetic efforts, there are several oblique references, such as the mention of pogroms and invalidated ration-books in "Jewish Main Street" (1945) or the allusions to the long history of Christian persecution of Jews (the "torquemadas stirring in the frosty veins" [3]) in "Gothic Landscape" (1951).[2] Layton's contributions to *Cerberus* (1952) include two poems that invoke the Holocaust: "Letter to Raymond Souster" and "Ex-Nazi." I will not presume to establish standards for effective poetry about the Holocaust; but these are ineffective poems by Layton's own standards. Layton's concept of the poet-prophet demands that poetry offer clear social critique or moral commentary, but these poems do not cohere into anything of the sort.[3] It is no coincidence that they are both from before 1953, which (as I discuss below) can be identified as the year when Layton found his mature poetic voice. These poems exhibit the same incoherence that often mars his earliest work, and they are therefore incapable of conveying any kind of commentary to the reader.

"Letter to Raymond Souster" had its only publication in *Cerberus*, suggesting Layton's awareness of its flaws. Despite Layton's frequent denigration of Eliot, the line "Deutschland undid him" (7) recalls "Richmond and Kew / Undid me" (293–94) from "The Fire Sermon" section of *The Waste Land*, and the intensive use of fragmentation and pastiche here resemble Eliot's methods in that poem. The opening line of "Letter to Raymond Souster"—"Man stinks like a dead horse"—announces a pessimistic meditation on human nature, and the poem's third through fifth stanzas clearly refer to the Holocaust:

> Gone are guilt and sin
> And religion
> Is something less than an opium
> Since lately we saw God
> The Jew's masterpiece
> Dissolve in the idolatrous smoke
> of a Polish crematorium
>
> The burning bush
> The burning bush
> Moses and
> the burning bush[4]

Hush my Jewish child
—ash
(*Cerberus* 64-65)

The two following stanzas seem to refer to the history of lynching and other racial violence in the United States, while the rest of the poem addresses human vileness generally. In short, the poem's fragments do not cohere. This form is atypical for Layton, and not one which he could manage deftly, as this excerpt shows. Moreover, the fact that Eliot himself searched for new forms after *The Waste Land* suggests the limits of a form based on pastiche and juxtaposition for social or moral commentary. But this poem clearly indicates that Layton was searching, in the early 1950s, for a mode or method that would allow him to address the Holocaust adequately.

"Ex-Nazi" imagines an encounter between a child and his neighbour, the ex-Nazi of the title. Crafted in Layton's early imagist manner, the poem suggests the long shadow of the Holocaust, but can do little more than evoke an uncomfortable mood. The images of snow and whiteness, and of heat and sun, seem incongruous and unmotivated. Moreover, although the conflict between innocence and guilt is interesting, I cannot understand why the neighbour is described as "Innocenter than his bounding mastiff," or why "the hot sun desiccates his guilt" (25). Though some critics have found ways to read such imagery as powerfully evocative,[5] I find that these surrealist elements complicate the message and certainly make it less accessible to a reading public. Such inaccessibility is at odds with the prophetic or social realist impulses that otherwise motivate Layton's earlier work.

For Layton, neither fragmentary pastiche nor evocative imagism proved effective as poetic strategies, and he did not pursue them as vehicles for prophetic moral commentary. His next published attempt to write the Holocaust, "The Ape and the Pharisee" (1951), is a kind of surrealist allegory which almost obscures its treatment of the Holocaust.[6] Its imagery of soap, chimneys, and skeletons—particularly in combination with references to Hillel and phylactery boxes—may be triangulated to hint at the Holocaust. The "Pharisees" of the title may refer to the historic religious party within Judaism, but is probably also intended more broadly to represent a particular kind of authority, "A person of the spirit or character commonly attributed to the Pharisees in the New Testament; a legalist or formalist; a self-righteous person, a hypocrite" ("Pharisee, n." Def. 2). The ape is probably a figure for the poet, who finds himself in opposition to authority, with all the connotations of mimicry that are suggested by con-

sidering "ape" as a verb. He has "a white hot rivet in his mind," but it quickly "grows cold," suggesting both a link to the moon later in the poem, and a moment of burning inspiration that cannot last (49). There is then a "you" (who is associated with horses), who tells the ape: "That's a silly thing to do / For a scholar / and a Jew" (49)—thus associating the ape with Layton himself—and so the ape "straightened up" (49). All this taken together suggests that this is a poem about the difficulties of writing about the Holocaust: the poet feels he can only ape; he loses inspiration; and (judging by the confusion of persons here) he is internally fragmented. Given these admissions, it is not surprising that the poem collapses into incoherence under the weight of its surreal images. The choice of images suggests that the poet is trying to say something about the Holocaust, but it is difficult to know exactly what he might be trying to say. At best, Layton is able to convey something about his own creative struggles; there is no clear moral or social commentary available in this poem.

In short, these very early poems seem to raise problems that they are incapable of solving decisively. Perhaps because of these unsuccessful attempts, it would be more than a decade before Layton's poetry made obvious reference to the Holocaust again. But his poetry of the late 1950s and early 1960s frequently includes animal imagery, which suggests that he did not entirely abandon the project in the intervening years. In the 1950s, Layton begins to make frequent use of metaphorical language that blurs the boundary between humans and other animals. These moments in which his poetic speakers compare, or even conflate, humans and animals constitute a commentary on the nature of humanity. As I read them, they are the next step in his process of finding an indirect or philosophical response to the Holocaust: in his search for answers, Layton takes a close look at *homo sapiens*, and observes its close resemblance to other animals. In "On the Death of A. Vishinsky" (1954), the speaker calls himself "a desperate animal" (123), and in "Thoughts in the Water" (1956), the speaker refers to himself as "a careless animal" (132). The use of the generic term here effectively denigrates the human speaker by demoting him to the category of "merely animal" or "brute." Contemporary instances of more specific zoomorphic comparisons also carry negative valences. "Vexata Quaestio" (1953) describes humans as "two-legged lice" (33), and "It's All in the Manner" (1954) compares them to worms. Similarly, "Eros Where The Rents Aren't High" derives its humour in part from its comparison of a man engaged in intercourse to a horse, while "For Priscilla" is a nasty satire that describes its subject as "a female hyena / of the spirit" (50). Layton makes use of such figurative language to suggest a very literal, biological

likeness between species. Moreover, the largely negative connotations of his animal imagery suggest that, in this phase of his career, his animal imagery makes the reader aware of the gross, bestial embodiment that most humans attempt to deny or repress. Instances of anthropomorphism in "The Ants" (1954) and "Sheep" (1958) send a similar message. This is an important first phase in Layton's response to the Holocaust: his commentary on the moral issues arising from those atrocities begins with the repeated assertion of humanity's brutish animality.

Layton consistently and repeatedly affirmed that humans must acknowledge their animality. This trend, begun in this earlier work, would continue throughout his career. Of course, animality is not always negative: it may also be associated with the sensuality and sexuality which Layton celebrates so often in his work, and he frequently rails against those who promote the repression of such vitality.[7] Indeed, for Layton it seems that the darker side of human animality results from this repression: our innate capacity for cruelty becomes more intense, or more dangerous, because we attempt to deny its existence. It is this aspect of Layton's thought which I will emphasize here because it enables an explanation of an important facet of his work. Layton strove to remind his audience about human animality because he hoped that awareness of our true nature might lead to change. In his Foreword to *The Shattered Plinths*, he suggests that "If we know the grim, unpalatable truths about ourselves we might in time learn to restrain our most destructive impulses. We can strive to accommodate ourselves to each other's egotism and for the sake of common survival modify or direct it into less apelike manifestations" (*Engagements* 130). Much later, Layton explained that "the writer's job is to make people aware that these demons are there in the human soul, and that they've got to be watched all the time" (*Poet: Irving Layton Observed*). As Michael Abraham has argued, for Layton, "History's only positive lesson is its negative example. As such, mankind's only hope lies in a direct acknowledgement of and engagement with its own beastliness, not in reverence for ancient wisdom" (90). Thus, Layton's animal imagery suggests a significant aspect of his personal philosophy.

If Layton's first collections show evidence of a desire to respond to the Holocaust, and other early work emphasizes human animality, there appears to have been an important development in his work during the mid-1950s. Brian Trehearne has argued persuasively for 1953 as the pivotal year in which "the mature and successful Layton" emerges (*Montreal Forties* 175). Trehearne invites us to compare "a total Layton output of sixty poems in the 1940's" with "the unsilenceable Layton of the 1950's,

who produced sixteen books, ten of them collections of new verse and two major selected volumes" (176). Layton produced several major self-reflexive poems in the years immediately after this shift: "In the Midst of My Fever" (1954), "The Cold Green Element" (1955), and "The Improved Binoculars" (1955). Significantly, these poems paint a bleak picture of humanity as callous, cruel, and bloodthirsty, in keeping with the representation of humans-as-animals in other work from the 1950s.[8]

The first obvious conjunction of animal imagery and pessimism or misanthropy occurs in "Paraclete" (1954), which is a pivotal poem in Layton's representation of animals. Like the poems mentioned above, it represents humanity as bestial. But it also represents non-human animals as joyful, innocent creatures who are often the victims of human cruelty, initiating what will become a trend in his work of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The poem's speaker offers a pessimistic view of human nature that the poem as a whole does not contradict. In fact, the title indicates approval: "paraclete" is "a title given to the Holy Spirit (or occas. Christ): an advocate, intercessor; a helper or comforter" ("paraclete, n."). This noun suggests that the speaker, by telling these truths about humanity, may be offering help or comfort, and is holy by virtue of doing so. In the first stanza, he declares, "I expect nothing from man / Save hecatombs / … And ferity" (65), and what follows is an elaboration or expansion on this belief. The speaker expects not only that humans will murder, but that they will do so on a large scale (hecatomb means "a sacrifice of many victims" ("hecatomb, n.")). Ferity—"The quality or state of being wild or savage"("ferity, n.")—captures in a word Layton's own conception of humanity: the thin veneer of civilization sometimes reins in, but cannot eliminate or conceal, the savage brutality of *homo sapiens*.

The remainder of the poem focuses on how, because interpersonal violence is not generally condoned, humanity's innate tendency toward violence is visited on other animals instead. The second stanza lists some victims of this redirection: "the sulphur-coloured / and young seals, white, without defense— / whatever crawls, flies, swims" (65), while the penultimate stanza offers a description of an act of violence as a particular example: "Or like a sodden idiot who plucks / A thrush from a willow, grief in her green hair, / Throttles it to uncover the root of its song" (66). The poem introduces another kind of animality: beautiful, gentle, and joyful. Such creatures contrast with the "queer beast" that is the human, and the poem even suggests that it is the attempt to sublimate our animality (both its positive and its negative aspects) that leads us to commit violence:

> It is as if, killing, he looked for answers
> To his discontent among the severed veins
> And in the hot blood of the slain
> Sought to inundate forever his self-horror
> (66)

This complex, nearly contradictory, representation of human/animal proximity and relations would offer Layton a fruitful way to address the moral problem of human cruelty. Though Layton was not yet able to comment directly on the events of the Holocaust, his representations of cruelty toward animals in this poem (and in many that follow) allow him to address the pressing moral issues that emerged from it.

Capitalizing on the strategy developed in "Paraclete," three of Layton's most canonical poems of the late 1950s represent animals as innocent victims in order to meditate on cruelty and evil. In Layton's much-reprinted, much-anthologized "The Bull Calf" (1956), the speaker describes the killing and burial of a bull calf by a farmer who does not want to keep it because male calves are not profitable. The speaker attributes "pride" and "the promise of sovereignty" to the calf—an anthropomorphic description which prompts the speaker to think "of the deposed Richard II" (129). The idea of sovereignty and ensuing deposition must be intended as ironic: this calf has never had, and could never have, anything resembling "absolute and independent authority" ("sovereignty, n." Def 3b). This may be intended as a comment on the animal's lack of self-determination, or (more likely) a kind of pre-emptive deflation of the idea of paying attention to the death of such an apparently insignificant being. Indeed, in the second stanza, the animal is "snuffing pathetically at the windless day," suggesting its weakness (130). After it is struck, the wounded calf appears to be "gathering strength for a mad rush," but this movement to escape or retaliate is obviously futile. After it is buried, the calf lies "as if asleep," and the "pity" of the waste of this animal's life prompts the speaker's tears. It seems as though the speaker is sincere in his sorrow for the calf, and in his frustration at a system in which animals are objectified ("like a block of wood") and killed when it is not profitable to raise them (there is "no money in bull calves." To cry, and admit to having done so, is a significant gesture. But it is also a complicated one: the speaker did not weep openly, but "turned away and wept" (130). This suggests that his response to the violence is not appropriate masculine behaviour—he hides his tears from the other men—and establishes the speaker's status as uniquely thoughtful or sensitive. It may be that the speaker's sorrow is more the result of his identification with the calf (as a proud or noble creature at the mercy of the profit motive)

than of any concern for the animal itself. That the poem seems more interested in the speaker's reaction than in the calf's pain suggests that Layton's real subject is human nature and human/animal relations. The contrast established between the speaker and the other men further suggests that the poem is primarily interested in what can be learned about morality by considering how humans commit, and respond to, violence toward animals.

Another poem in this vein is "Cain" (1958). Here it is clearly the speaker himself, and he alone, who commits the act of cruelty. The act of shooting a frog with an air rifle is deliberate, and involves setting aside the individual personality: "I measured back five paces, the Hebrew / In me, narcissist, father of children, / laid to rest. From there I took aim and fired" (179). These lines suggest that, in order to commit this act, the speaker must ignore significant aspects of his identity: his racial heritage, which should discourage violence against innocents; his self-love or dignity; and his role as a model for his son. This implies that society imposes taboos which should prevent violence, but that those taboos are easily discarded. There follows a detailed description, full of metaphors and similes, of the frog's reaction to being hit by the air rifle; the hit is not immediately fatal, giving the speaker ample time to observe the dying creature and its reactions. This prompts a meditation on death more generally, which affirms the basic similarity of all mortal creatures: "But Death makes us all look ridiculous. / Consider this frog (dog, hog, what you will) / Sprawling, his absurd corpse rocked by the tides" (179). He goes on to compare the dying frog to "a retired oldster… / Living off the last of his insurance" (179). This rhetoric serves to distract the reader from the animal's suffering by moving the poem into a comic register; it is also a kind of elaborate *post-hoc* justification on the part of the speaker. And the speaker's desire, in the face of a pressing awareness of his own mortality, is to commit more acts of violence:

> Absurd, how absurd. I wanted to kill
> At the mockery of it, kill and kill
> Again—the self-infatuate frog, dog, hog,
> Anything with the stir of life in it …
> (180)

Although the poem moves on to a consideration of the fall of empires, and another look at the dead frog as "A comic; a tapdancer apologizing / for a fall, or an Emcee," the main point, as implied by the title, has been made here (180). The poem suggests that we are all sons of Cain, ready and able to commit senseless acts of violence. Moreover, we are certainly no better

than other animals, who the poem suggests are Abel to our Cain, and whom we kill out of envy, jealousy, or fear.

"For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation on Flies and Kings" (1959) is contemporary with "Cain," but it implies a different, and rather troubling, ethics. It is perhaps the first clear indication in Layton's poetry of a belief that violence may sometimes be permissible. The poem, written in Layton's Nietzschean/Dionysian mode, suggests that the ends may justify the means, and that some lives count for more than others. The poem begins with the speaker killing a fly, and admitting to having killed other insects in the past:

> So, circling above my head, a fly.
> Haloes of frantic monotone.
> Then a smudge of blood smoking
> On my fingers, let Jesus and Buddha cry.
>
> . . . But I
> Am burning flesh and bone,
> An indifferent creature between
> Cloud and stone;
> Smash insects with my boot.
>
> (215-16)

The poem goes on to establish a contrast between "the meek-browed and poor," who are "etiolated" and "do not dance," and those who "dance with desire" and so "Weave before they lie down / A red carpet for the sun" (216). The sun, in Layton's work, generally represents Dionysus and divinity—a kind of true religion that is here contrasted with Christianity.[9] The speaker allies himself with Mao: "Poet and dictator, you are as alien as I" (216)—alien, that is, from the poor and weak who are prey to the "enchantments" of Christian morality. Moreover, in the final stanza, he declares

> I pity the meek in their religious cages
> And flee them; and flee
> The universal sodality
> Of joy-haters, joy-destroyers.
>
> (217)

Thus, the speaker would seem to side with Mao, and similar powerful figures, who are willing to reject conventional morality and forge a new world: he suggests that this is how one weaves a carpet for the sun.

Moreover, the poem would seem to excuse or diminish any violence that may be required to achieve such aims. The insects, flowers, or bushes that the speaker harms are described as "Jivatma" (216)—the word used in Hinduism for "a living being, or more specifically, the immortal essence of a living organism (human, animal, fish or plant etc.) which survives physical death" ("Jiva"). Thus, the speaker says that "they endure / Endure and proliferate" (216). If this is the case for these lesser living things, the second stanza suggests, if only by juxtaposition, that human lives are as capable of "enduring," and are of as little concern. Wynne Francis's observation strengthens this link: "Flies and other flying insects abound in Layton's poetry. On the literal level they are merely annoying distractions: symbolically they represent people, the mass of humanity" ("Layton's Red Carpet" 51). As in the other poems examined thus far, Layton represents animals in order to comment on human nature and moral issues. But in this instance, the poem does not condemn the violence against innocent animal victims, and implicitly condones violence against humans. This, too, is a prophetic message, but a much more troubling one. It is significant, however, that animals play a crucial role in this meditation on human nature and human violence, which forms part of Layton's initial, very philosophical, response to the Holocaust.[10] Through these depictions of violence toward animals, Layton meditates on human cruelty, human animality, and the place of evil and violence in his moral philosophy.

1963 saw the publication of Layton's *Balls for a One Armed Juggler*, a collection that seems to mark another turning point in his struggle to address the Holocaust in poetry. In his foreword to that volume, he opines that the topics generally addressed by poets are

> hardly to the point in an age of mass terror, mass degradation, when the human being has less value than a bedbug or a cockroach.
>
> What insight does the modern poet give us into the absolute evil of our times? Where is the poet who can make clear for us Belsen? Vortkuta? Hiroshima? There is no poet in the English-speaking world who gives me the feeling that into his lines have entered the misery and crucifixion of our age. (*Engagements* 104)

In this collection, Layton attempts to be that poet, as he was unable to be in his earlier work. *Juggler* contains two poems which reference the long history of Jewish persecution ("History as a Slice of Ham" and "Soren Kierkegaard"), and two poems that name sites of mass murder ("For My Friend…" and "Le Tombeau de la Mort"). "Whom I Write For," discussed further below, addresses the problem of writing after the Holocaust. If

these poems were the only responses to the Holocaust in this collection, his foreword would be a poor introduction to the volume. But *Juggler* also contains a series of poems about human cruelty toward animals, much like those discussed above. Read in the context of Layton's foreword, and alongside the historical references elsewhere in the collection, these poems stand as an indirect treatment of the traumatic moral issues arising from "the misery…of our age." The animals stand in for the wounded humans whom Layton cannot yet conjure; they allow him to represent the rottenness and violence at the core of human nature, and thus suggest a kind of explanation for the Holocaust and similar atrocities. Situating the animal poems in *Juggler* within the context of that collection justifies reading them as social or moral commentary on the Holocaust and human nature.

The speaker in "Therapy" relates two separate animal anecdotes. The first three stanzas describe his affection for a lame kitten that was born to his family's cat when he was six: he recalls that it "had all my love," "all my agonized attention" (255). He says that "its playfulness /[…] / broke my heart" and so he "was glad" when the kitten died. This is a reasonable reaction to which the reader can be sympathetic: the kitten was unwell, perhaps suffering, and so one might be inclined to be glad that its suffering had ended. But in the two final stanzas, the speaker relates a second event: "Yesterday" he "axed a young badger / rummaging in our garbage bin / for food" (255). The contrast in the speaker's interactions with these creatures is striking: the domestic animal is loved, the intrusive wild animal is killed. And the speaker shows no remorse; instead, he declares: "I am now strong enough for God and Man" (255). As Trehearne explains, the speaker's action "earns him the poet's corrosive closing irony […]. He is indeed strong enough for a man: strong enough to kill without reason a weaker, joyful creature" ("Introduction" xxix). The reference to God may suggest the man's wildly inflated ego, or the notion that only God has (or should have) control over life and death. In representing this speaker's inconsistent attitude toward other creatures, his casual violence, and his self-promotion to the level of a deity, Layton offers a prophetic social commentary on significant flaws in human morality and human behaviour. Layton's primary mission seems to be to raise awareness of the human capacity for cruelty or violence against the innocent, of which voiceless animals are a potent symbol.

Juggler also includes a trio of poems involving violence against animals that are connected by the similarity of their situation and imagery. In both "Still Life" and "Ambiguities of Conduct," the speaker and his interlocutor are discussing art and philosophy, and then the interlocutor, care-

lessly and without motivation, kills an animal (a bird and an insect, respectively). This situation closely resembles that in "Breakdown," also included in *Juggler*, with the important difference that the victim in that poem is human.[11] "Still Life," by its title, suggests the possible cruelty within art itself: that is, its capacity to still (stop) life. While "speaking of modern art," the speaker sees a linnet, "wiping its beak / on the fallen leaves and grass, / joyfully ignoring both of us" (250). Thus, the bird is very much alive, and is associated with joy. And then:

> As if he had done this
> many times before,
> the stranger dislodged the flat stone
> near his hand
> and let it crash down heavily
> on the hopping bird.
>
> (250)

The stranger's reaction—"'That makes an exciting composition'"—condemns him further by establishing him as preferring death over life, and artistic construction over reality. In "Ambiguities of Conduct," the speaker's interlocutor declares that it is important for love to be "sincere,"

> Even if, later,
> he deliberately flicked
> his cigarette ash
> into a flowercup
> where a black insect was crawling.
>
> (276)

The man's "excited / words of love," are not interrupted by this act; the speaker believes that "I alone heard" the "sizzle" and "scream" of the dying animal (276). This indicates both the interlocutor's indifference to the suffering of other creatures, and the speaker's special status as intensely sensitive. It may even suggest a kind of empathy or identification with the animal. In both of these poems, the combination of interlocutor's indifference to physical suffering with their elevated conversation and other evidence of "civilization" is particularly striking. This is perhaps why Layton repeats the scene three times in the same collection: he is alerting his readers to the cruelty that lurks below the surface, within all of us. Layton writes animals as victims because humans often kill them in a futile

attempt to assert their superiority, and because the joyful embodiment of other species contrasts with humanity's anxious denial.

"Butterfly on Rock" again includes imagery of rocks and wings, but in this instance, as in "Therapy," it is the speaker himself who kills the creature. Observing a butterfly settled on a rock, the speaker convinces himself that "the rock has borne this" butterfly as a result of its "secret desire / to be a thing alive" (282). Confronted with an apparent epiphany—that the inanimate can become animate—the speaker explains:

> Forgot were the two shattered porcupines
> I had seen die in the bleak forest.
> Pain is unreal; death an illusion:
> There is no death in all the land,
> I heard my voice cry;
> And brought my hand down on the butterfly
> And felt the rock move beneath my hand.
> (282)

In other words, the speaker has deluded himself about the nature of life and death; he thinks that it is acceptable to kill the butterfly because "pain is unreal" and death is "an illusion" and that it is the rock that moves.[12] Although the idea of there being no death might make sense in a Christian context, it hardly fits with Jewish doctrine; and neither tradition explains why the rock is imagined as alive or animated. The poem becomes clearer within the context of Layton's Nietzscheanism, which would sanction violence as a means to an end, and introduce the idea of creation as occurring through destruction (Trehearne, Francis). On the other hand, "forgot" recalls the similar moment in "Cain," in which various public identities are "laid to rest" (179). It suggests an ironic reading of this poem, by implying that one must forget a great deal (more than just the dead porcupines) in order to believe that "death is an illusion" and that the rock has moved. The poem emphasizes the way that delusion can lead to cruelty, and may also enable *post-hoc* justification. The poem is therefore a prophetic commentary on human evil, and an indirect response to the moral issues arising from the Holocaust.

"The Predator" is similarly ambiguous, but ultimately legible as a poem that represents violence toward animals, and contrasts humans with non-human animals in order to offer a prophetic statement about humanity's capacity for cruelty. The speaker has encountered a dead fox on the side of the road, and the poem's first stanzas imagine the cause of its death: perhaps it had been caught in a trap, or killed by a farmhand. In either case,

the fox is the victim of human cruelty. The speaker thinks that it is "hard to believe / a fox is ever dead" because "his fame's against / him; one suspects him of anything," and "his evident / self-enjoyment is against him also: / no creature so wild and gleeful can ever be done for" (265). Once again, an animal is idealized as representing joyful embodiment. The second half of the poem contrasts the fox, and "free and gallant predators like him," with man, "the dirtiest predator of all" (265, 266). The fox's self-enjoyment is contrasted with human self-hatred; "Man, animal tamed and tainted, wishes to forget" his animality, but is unable to do so (265). The speaker declares that "Man sets even / more terrible traps for his own kind" (266). This poem, then, does not so much lament the death of the fox as valorize the fox in order to present a contrast between animal predation and human cruelty.

"A Tall Man Executes a Jig" has the distinction of being the final poem in *Juggler.*[13] Being a sequence of seven unrhymed sonnets, it is also longer and more tightly structured than most of Layton's poetry. This poem, which is a meditation on the role of the artist in society and on the nature of humanity, contains significant animal imagery. The first stanza emphasizes the tall man's communion with nature: "The noise he heard was that of whizzing flies, / the whistlings of some small imprudent birds" (335). The second and third stanzas consider his interactions with the flies or gnats, and these insects signify quite differently here than they did in "For Mao Tse-Tung," where they represented insignificant life. Lee Briscoe Thompson and Deborah Black have suggested that "Both the gnats and the man are dispensable to the ongoing maintenance of the natural cycle; thus the ultimate irony is in their reciprocal valuing of each other: the gnats as crown to man, and the man as substantial world to the gnats" (37). The tall man's reaction to the flies is complex: "the assaults of the small flies made him / Glad at last, until he saw purest joy / In their frantic jiggings under a hair" (335). In contrast to these flies, he "felt himself enormous," and he attempts to diminish them to "motion without meaning, disquietude / Without sense or purpose, ephemerides" (336). On other hand, they are "haloing" and provide him with an "aureole," so that the relationship is evidently a significant one that imbues the tall man with a sense of power or meaning (336). If the flies represent the mass of humanity, the artist figure's relationship with them is crucial to his self-construction.

In the last three sonnets of the poem, the tall man observes a wounded snake:

> … temptation coiled before his feet:
> A violated grass snake that lugged

> Its intestine like a small red valise.
> A cold-eyed skinflint it now was, and not
> 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.
> (337)

This snake is both a symbol and a vulnerable physical being, and Layton strives to separate this creature from its rich textual history. It is more than just a figure for temptation or wisdom, and its embodiment and mortality are emphasized by Layton's striking image of the valise. The tall man first "wept because pity was useless," and then "Beside the rigid snake the man stretched out / In fellowship of death" (337, 338)—strongly indicating an identification or kinship between the snake and the artist figure. In the final lines of the final stanza, the snake is transformed into a dragon, and forms a new kind of crown for the tall man:

> Meanwhile the green snake crept upon the sky,
> Huge, his mailed coat glittered 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.
> (338)

The poem suggests that an alliance with animality is necessary for the tall man's success and implies that the artist's mission has to do with understanding the place of humanity in the universe, relative to other creatures. If the snake and the flies represent different kinds of human audiences, the poem suggests that both audiences contribute to the artist's success. In this poem, animal imagery enables Layton to meditate not only on the role of the poet, but also on the nature of humanity and on pressing moral questions.

The prefatory remarks to *Juggler* prompt readers to consider its poems as a response to the Holocaust, but "Whom I Write For" is the only poem in the collection to refer to the Holocaust with any directness. I argue that it is Layton's first coherent, effective poem about the Holocaust, made possible by the indirect poetic responses involving animals that preceded it (or were contemporary with it). As its title suggests, it is a self-reflexive poem, primarily concerned with the problem of how to write poetry about the Holocaust, or with the role of the poet in responding to such atrocities. It begins aggressively: "When reading me, I want you to feel / as if I had

ripped your skin off" (273). The poem continues this way for eight more lines, describing gross, violent acts as a way of expressing the shocking or violent impact he hopes his verse will have. Lines such as "I want you to feel as if I had slammed / your child's head against a spike," emphasize family relations and so manifest an awareness of the way that violence has historically been used to fracture familial bonds (273). Then, as in many of Layton's prefaces, the speaker disavows any intention to make poetry that is easy or comforting, and takes several lines to mock poets who do offer such fare (they are "no prophets, but toadies and trained seals!") (273).[14] Layton's attempt to understand the Holocaust involves placing it in the wider context of human cruelty and violence and meditating on the poet's role in or response to such events.

Layton's reading of the Holocaust as not unique, but similar to other events of the twentieth century, becomes clearer as the poem progresses. In the third stanza, the speaker claims to "write for" both the perpetrators and the victims of mass murder and atrocities: by this, I understand him to mean that he writes so that they will not be forgotten, or so that the world will continue to be aware of what they have done or suffered. The mention, in this stanza, of "the young man, demented, / who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima" (274) suggests an important aspect of Layton's ethos: all mass murders, not just attacks against Jews, are tragic and deplorable. The point becomes even clearer when, several lines later, he claims, "I write for the gassed, burnt, tortured, / and humiliated everywhere" (274). It is primarily these lines, along with the reference to Adolph Eichmann several lines later, which suggest that Holocaust is a central concern of this text. The poem ends as it began, with a litany of descriptions of violent acts—"the sound of crunching bones or bursting eyeballs; / or a nose being smashed with a gun butt" (274)—which are metaphors for the power of words. Obviously, Layton means to make readers intensely uncomfortable. But he is also asking difficult questions about how a poet can address such atrocities, which are a crucial aspect of human experience in the twentieth century. The violence represented in the opening stanzas is so excessive, so far beyond the realm of what words are capable of doing, that they become legible as a kind of fantasy of poetic potency: only in his imagination could the poet's words wreak such destruction. In this way, the poem becomes, as its title suggests, more about the difficulty of writing about the Holocaust than about the Holocaust itself or war more generally. There is something like despair bordering on insanity here: how, after all, can a single poet with his pen compete against armies?[15]

In *Juggler*, Layton began to overcome such obstacles, and to respond to the most pressing moral questions of the later twentieth century. I have argued that animal imagery was integral to this creative process, allowing him to address the underlying issues before he was able to comment on the historical events directly. The effectiveness of this technique as a stepping-stone to more direct poetic confrontations can be seen in *Periods of the Moon* (1967), which contains many moving poems about the Holocaust. In *The Shattered Plinths* (1968), the historical events of the Holocaust and the issues they raise (made freshly pressing by the Six-Day War) are represented in some manner in the majority of the poems. In these and subsequent collections, direct reference to the Holocaust increases, and images of violence toward animals appear less frequently.

Given the framing material in *Juggler*, it seems reasonable to consider how such work might constitute a response to the Holocaust; I argue that it responds, not by representing or alluding to the historical event, but by representing animals in such a way as to lead us to consider its implications for our understanding of human nature. As Anta Pick has argued, the Holocaust involved a "fundamental unravelling of the human" (51). Marianne DeKoven has observed that animals are "a locus both of the other who calls us to ethics and of many of the things that, in our various modes of ethics, we value" (367). For these and other reasons, animal imagery proved useful to Irving Layton as he sought to address the major ethical problems of his era. Layton later wrote that "The new image of man may not be a pleasant one to contemplate, but if it is an accurate one it might in the end turn out to be a gain if illusions are jettisoned" (*Engagements* 130). By emphasizing, in *Balls for a One Armed Juggler*, the human ability to commit senseless acts of violence against innocent creatures, Layton offers something akin to Hannah Arendt's notion of "the banality of evil." He implies that no one is innocent, because everyone is capable of such crime. He demands a reconsideration of what it means to be human, because, while animals may be vicious, only the human animal attempts to deny its ferity, and only the human can be so malicious as to kill without motivation.

Notes

1 Other critics have recently become aware of this gap. At the conference that gave rise to this collection, Jordan Berard read Layton's later Holocaust poetry in the wider context of Canadian Jewish responses (with particular attention to A.M Klein). See also Norman Ravvin's "Myths of Montreal: Irving Layton, Jewish Thematics, and The

Mainstream" in this issue.

2 Unless otherwise noted, Layton's poetry is quoted as it appears in his *Collected Poems* (1965).

3 See Essert (chapter three), Trehearne (*Montreal Forties*), Deshaye, Baker, and Butovsky.

4 While reading an earlier version of this essay, Miranda Hickman observed that these lines are another allusion to *The Waste Land*, as they recall the final lines of "The Fire Sermon."

5 See, for example, Greenstein's much more approving reading of this poem (36-38). "Ex-Nazi" may be compared with the later poem "Das Wahre Ich," which is a moving presentation of a similar situation (*Laughing Rooster* 103).

6 I quote from the poem as it appeared in *The Black Huntsman*; it was reprinted only once, in *Collected Poems* (1971). I am indebted to Joel Deshaye for his insightful comments on this poem.

7 His poem "The Puma's Tooth" is particularly interesting in this respect. It begins "Man's a crazed ape/ A balled-up parasite" (165), and discusses how a denial of human animality prompts those whose "heart[s] swell / With love of purity / To crush your genitals" (165)—that is, to repress their own and other's sexuality. The image of the puma's tooth, which appears in the final stanza, represents a "fierce" and "beautiful" vitality that contrasts with (and combats) such repression.

8 Some lines which suggest the misanthropic mood of such poems: "In the midst of this rich confusion, a miracle happened: someone / quietly performed a good deed" ("In the Midst of My Fever" 44); "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" ("The Improved Binoculars" 94).

9 On the importance of the sun imagery, see Francis, "Layton and Nietzsche" (47 and *passim*).

10 I fail to understand how someone so concerned with human cruelty, and with the Holocaust, could believe that the mass destruction of life would ever be acceptable. Nonetheless, it does not seem accurate to read this text ironically, or in any other way that would avoid seeing it as condoning violence. It is also consistent with Nietzschean philosophy.

11 "Breakdown" depicts the capacity for violence that lurks below the veneer of civilization. The opening stanza defines the speaker's companion as a "cultivated / gentleman" (278) and offers his cultural credentials (opera-lover, successful academic). The two men are "admiring the instinctual swans" in Parc Lafontaine when the companion "stopped suddenly" in front of a blind woman on a bench and "and plunged two pins, / one into each cheek" (278). The surprising and unprovoked violence of this apparently gentle man represents both a mental breakdown of the individual, and the breakdown of polite society, which could occur at any moment because of the instability of the human animal.

12 *Poet: Irving Layton Observed* includes a scene in which Layton discusses this poem. There, he seems to be asserting, with the poem's speaker, a belief in the ability to create through destruction.

13 Its significance is also suggested by it placement as the final poem of *Collected Poems*.

14 Note, here, the use of animal imagery with pejorative connotations; this offers another example of the way that Layton sees some animals as higher or nobler than others.

15 I remain puzzled by the declaration that "I write for Castro and Tse-Tung, the only poets / I ever learned anything from." Is this real praise, or ironic? This poem may be compared with "The New Sensibility" from *The Shattered Plinths* (1968): "The up-to-date-poet / beside labouring at his craft / should be a dead shot…" The later poem also invokes Pound, and refers to the Six-Day War.

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