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Animal Deaths and the Lyric Voice in the Poetry of Irving Layton

by Robert David Stacey

Yesterday,
for the first time in my life
I axed a young badger
rummaging in our garbage bin
for food.

And though he wobbled a short distance
before he keeled over,
I am now strong enough for God and Man.
—*"Therapy"* (Fornalutx *18)*

Discussing Layton's dramatic adoption, in the early 1950s, of the subjectivist, ego-centric and verbally precocious poetics that would define his mature style, Brian Trehearne writes: "Layton [...] clearly sought a modernist poetics in which a return to lyric would not run counter to, but would rather augment the juxtaposition and intensity of his imagery, and he found one by breaking through the conventional boundaries of selfhood, especially that boundary that divides our conscious experience into 'subjective' and 'objective' records" (221). I would like to build upon this important observation by further exploring the matter of lyric voice in Layton, a thing so decisive that his assumption of it can be said to mark an historical "return to lyric" in the context of Canadian literature and modernist poetics more generally. Even so, I am less interested here in reading Layton's lyricism, as Trehearne does—eloquently and convincingly—in terms of its meaning for Canadian literary history and, more immediately, the author's own literary development than I am with a certain lyric *exemplarity* in his work. The analysis that follows is therefore more synchronic than diachronic, more structural than nationalist, more speculative than descriptive. It does, however, attempt to explain one of Layton's most habitual and notorious motifs: animal cruelty and murder. It is my contention that the death of the animal constitutes, for Layton, a particular kind of *demonstration* inextricably tied to lyric process and to the consolidation in language of the speaker's voice. It is no accident, therefore, that the emergence of this motif—so salient a feature of Layton's work that we might, in fact, regard

it as a kind of signature—coincides with his abandonment of modernist objectivity and depersonalization and his turn to lyric in the early 50s. This is so, I argue, because the death of the animal establishes the conditions of possibility for the lyric poem: a general principle that takes on special meaning in the context of Layton's work which so often reflects self-consciously on the origins of the poet's voice.

It has become customary, when speaking of lyric, to relate it to the processes of subjectivization and individuation, the production in language of the speaking subject, the "I" of the poem upon which its authority rests. "Implicitly or explicitly," writes Mutlu Blasing in *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words*, "the speaker in a lyric poem is an 'I'" (27). Crucially, however, this "I" does not precede the poem, but is its *effect*. In other words, the poem is not the expression of a subject who precedes it as much as it is the primary function of lyric to produce or actualize a subject: "A convincing lyric subject is spoken by the words she speaks" (Blasing 35). As a *spoken* subject, the "I" of the poem is therefore an effect of speech, emerging in and through the presence of a *voice*. The lyric, states Paul de Man, is "the instance of represented voice" ("Anthropomorphism" 261). Accordingly, voice is not simply a vehicle for the poet's language, but a sign of subjectivity or personhood. Paul Valery: "I or me are the words associated with voice. They are like the meaning of voice itself" (qtd. in Agamben 32).

To properly understand the lyric, then, one must not only listen to 'what the poet is saying' but remain conscious of the fact that the lyric invites us to treat its words *as something said* in the first place, that its language projects the character and texture of a voice. It is of concern precisely because the poem's subsequent interpretation or decoding will always assume, as a matter of course, this first principle, whether consciously or not.

> The principle of intelligibility, in lyric poetry, depends on the phenomenalization of the poetic voice. Our claim to understand a lyric text coincides with the actualization of a speaking voice, be it (monologically) that of the poet or (dialogically) that of the exchange that takes place between author and reader in the process of comprehension. (Paul de Man, "Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory" 55)

To suggest as much is to endow lyric with a special status among poetic genres: as the "phenomenalization" of voice, it is not simply an instance of discourse, but rehearses the very coming-into-being of discursive possibility: "The utterance and the instance of discourse are only identifiable as

such through the voice that speaks them, and only by attributing a voice to them can something like a taking place of discourse be demonstrated" (Agamben, *Language and Death* 32).

Prior to meaning, voice is the *originary effect* that grounds the poetic utterance as the expression of an actualized and self-conscious subject with all its powers and encumbrances. The concretization in language of an embodied, corporeal being who wills language to take place by *choosing* to speak, and is caught, so to say*, in the act making this choice*, lyric poetry constitutes an inescapably *ethical* discourse. Given this argument that the ethical subject is first and foremost a speaker whose voice, as such, announces a capacity and willingness to choose, consciously, between speech or silence, and encouraged by Al Purdy's elliptical comment in a 1963 review of Layton's *Balls for a One-Armed Juggler* that the recurrent depiction of animal sacrifice, cruelty, and murder in Layton's work serves a "moral" purpose (81), I would like to pursue the notion that a *necessary*, and not just accidental, connection exists between animal death, lyric discourse, and ethical self-awareness.

In his review, Purdy does not separate out the violent deaths of animals from human fatalities, and indeed any reading of Layton must begin by recognizing that for him the "all of us who crawl and die" ("Elegy for Marilyn Monroe," *A Wild Peculiar Joy* 268-69) includes all living things, human and animal. Yet this common fate serves as the basis for a sustained comparison, one that underlies Layton's entire writing career, of a *difference in kind* between the death of the animal and that of the human being. Many of us know the William Butler Yeats poem that begins:

> Nor dread nor hope attend
> A dying animal;
> A man awaits his end
> Dreading and hoping all;

And ends:

> He knows death to the bone—
> Man has created death.
> (234)

Following Hegel, we might say that the upshot of this poem is that man has "a faculty for death" (qtd. in Agamben xii) that separates him from the natural world. We have here a tension that Layton explores repeatedly in his work. If, as he argues in "The Absurd Animal," man is an absurdity it is

because man, unlike the animal, has a "fear of death," and, unlike the animal, is led to sublimate this fear into the making of both "bomb[s]" and "immortal poem[s]" (*Fornalutx* 60). Destructive or creative, an awareness of death, the absurd fate of the human, and what distinguishes him from the rest of his fellow creatures, occupies the very centre of Layton's ethics and his poetics. As he writes in "The Lyric," "As moles construct / their burrows and birds their nests, the lyric poet / invents his own world [....] Mine's made from charred bones, the smiles of fair-haired / humans / looking at them" (*Fornalutx* 19).

There is nothing particularly original in this contrast between animal and human life—in fact, the entire history of Western philosophy, including ethics, might be summarized in terms of the exploration and extension of this basic opposition. But, as Giorgio Agamben recounts, one term has dominated in the differentiation between these primary categories: language. Animals and humans are different—or better put—a gulf separates animals and humans because the latter has language. And here we get to the crux of Yeats's poem, and to my reading of Layton: it is only because humans possess the faculty of language that they also—unavoidably—have this "faculty for death." In short, it is Layton's view of man as an *animal endowed with speech*—a more conventional and classical view than the opening quotation from Trehearne would suggest, insofar as it necessarily reinforces at least one dimension of the separation between "subjective" and "objective" worlds—that links lyric voice, animal deaths and an ethical awareness of human mortality in his work.

Agamben begins his *Language and Death* (and this is the primary source of my reading of Layton) with a quotation from Martin Heidegger:

> Mortals are they who can experience death as death. Animals cannot do so. But animals cannot speak either. The essential relation between death and language flashes up before us, but remains still unthought. (qtd. in Agamben xi).

Agamben will think this thought throughout *Language and Death*, returning to Heidegger after a long excursus through Aristotle, Augustine, and Hegel. But the key to this enigma is already contained in Heidegger's use of the phrase "animals cannot speak." By focusing on speech rather than the more generalized and less phenomenal "language," Agamben ultimately finds in the idea of voice the negative foundation of language, thought, and consciousness that links human speech with death: "Death and Voice have the same negative structure and they are metaphysically inseparable" (*Language and Death* 86).

On the one hand, Agamben reiterates the idea we have already identified in the lyric theory of Valery, de Man and Blasing that aligns voice with a pure indication to mean, an announcement of the taking place of language:

> The Voice does not will any proposition or event; it wills that language exist, it wills the originary event that contains the possibility of every event. The Voice is the originary ethical dimension in which man pronounces his 'yes' to language and consents that it may take place. (87)

In other words, voice is not simply the words of a speaking man or woman, but an indication before any semantic content is given that something will be said and that there is a *someone* to say it. A voice, recognized as a voice and not as mere "empty" sound, is the very sign that human discourse is taking place. Furthermore, voice is the "originary ethical dimension" insofar as through it man reveals himself as the sort of being (perhaps the only one) for whom speech is a matter of *consent*. To have a voice, to speak, is to have made a choice and to be capable of choosing.

On the other hand, the voice's connection with death resides in the fact that it emerges in and through the negation, the obviation or destruction or abrogation in man of that kind of voice that *is* mere sound, a voice that has its most obvious presence in the cry of the animal. Agamben thus distinguishes between two modes of voice, which he differentiates by use of a capital letter. Lower case "voice" corresponds to un-phonemic emissions of sound from the living organism, whereas "Voice" represents sounds from the living organism that are given to mean, that are taken in their intention to signify, and do so, on the back as it were, of the un-phonemic speech they must necessarily displace. "Voice" constitutes a negation of merely animal, biological, un-speechified sound production.

In speaking, man "kills" his animal self, but in such a way that his speech contains within its very structure a "memory" of the death of the animal, a fate to which he is also subject, but which he, unlike the animal, is doomed to anticipate.

> To consent to (or refuse) language does not here mean simply to speak (or be silent). To consent to language signifies to act in such a way that, in the abysmal experience of the taking place of language, in the removal of the voice, another Voice is disclosed to man, and along with this are also disclosed the dimension of being and the mortal risk of nothingness. To consent to the taking place of language, to listen to the Voice, signifies, thus, to consent also to

> death, to be capable of dying (*sterben*) rather than simply deceasing (*ableben*). (87)

As Hegel puts it, "the death of the animal is the becoming of consciousness" (qtd. in Agamben 47).[1]

Given the preceding, we could say that lyric, as the effect of a Voice and as the device through which the subject emerges as a subject because he speaks, has the essential function of probing the relationship between language and death. In the case of Layton where these concerns are explicit—as they were in Yeats, for instance—we might say that the animal poems, or the poems that stage the animal's death, are precisely those poems which allegorize the lyric condition itself, which is also to say they trace the inseparability of speech, of voice, and of an awareness of death—or of temporality or of history proper. Layton's animal killing poems are in every case simultaneously poems about lyric possibility—that is to say they are about the subject's entry into language by way of finding (himself in) his voice—*and* about that speaking subject's "abysmal" recognition of his mortal destiny. I must therefore disagree with Brian Trehearne's claim that animals generally operate in Layton's poetry as analogues of the artist "whose creative vitality is sacrificed at the hands of ignorant, joyless 'runts' seeking to prove their grandeur" ("Introduction" xxxi). Rather, I would say that the deaths of animals—which we must note is repeatedly effected by Layton's speakers themselves—rehearses the "becoming of consciousness" of the poet as an enunciating "I": the annulment of voice and the emergence of Voice as pure intention to mean, an intention contained within and carried out by the poem as a whole. If, as Northrop Frye argues, the lyric poem enacts a ritual occasion ("Approaching the Lyric" 31), we might say that the animal killing poems ritualize the advent of speech as such, and along with it the promise of human death understood, not as the biological cessation of life to which we are exposed in every animal fatality, but, specifically, as the annulment of *Voice*.

To turn now (finally, I am sorry) to one of Layton's better-known poems, "The Bull Calf," originally published in 1956. I am sure that many readers have understood it as a poem of initiation of sorts. I reproduce the poem in its entirety:

> The thing could barely stand. Yet taken
> from his mother and the barn smells
> he still impressed with his pride,
> with the promise of sovereignty in the way
> his head moved to take us in.

The fierce sunlight tugging the maize from the ground
licked at his shapely flanks.
He was too young for all that pride.
I thought of the deposed Richard II.

"No money in bull calves," Freeman had said.
The visiting clergyman rubbed the nostrils
now snuffing pathetically at the windless day.
"A pity," he sighed.
My gaze slipped off his hat towards the empty sky
that circled over the black knot of men,
over us, and the calf waiting for the first blow.

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.

(*A Wild Peculiar Joy* 29-30)

Here, the quotidian execution of a bull calf affords an opportunity for the speaker to assert his autonomy from the "black knot of men" who oversee the procedure. As such, the poem performs one of the functions of lyric, namely the individuation of the speaker as independent of mind and spirit, a process the poem underscores by way of negotiating the transition from the "we's" and "us's" of the first three stanzas to the "I" of the final line who "turn[s] away and "we[eps]." Hence the "privacy" of the lyric noted

by Frye: "The private poem often takes off from something that blocks normal activity [...] Such a block has much to do with creating the sense of an individualized speaker" ("Approaching the Lyric" 34).

But another process is going on alongside this one, one no less social, but moving in the other direction such that it asserts, finally, an affiliation with that "black knot of men," the speaker's deep sympathy for the calf notwithstanding. In his book *Voice* David Appelbaum employs a set of terms quite similar to Agamben's (though he indicates no direct influence). Differentiating between what he calls "voice," a "kinaesthetic" and "proprioceptive" pre-meaningful expression of the organic body—Agamben's lowercase "voice"—and "speech," the "communicat[ion] of signs for the sake of cognition"—Agamben's upper-case "Voice"—Appelbaum argues that Western history has operated by way of the suppression of voice by speech. This would correspond more or less with the distinction made between the semiotic register of language and its symbolic register.

Applying these terms to "The Bull Calf," we could say that the semiotic, lower-case 'voice' is represented in the poem by way of the calf's "pathetic" "snuffing" in the second stanza which confronts the equally but differently pathetic comments of the farmer and clergyman: "No money in bull calves" and its response, "a pity." This "snuffing" is echoed in the third stanza by the river that "snuffled on the improvised beach." The onomatopoeia here emphasizes the purely physical and unselfconscious dimension of these sounds, just as the "sepulchral gurgle" of the calf's settling corpse is precisely not speech, but sound, no different than any gurgle. Appelbaum points to human sounds such as babbling, gurgling, coughing, sneezing, laughing and crying that inevitably cause anxiety because they interrupt speech and assert an unwanted human connection with the animal voice (19).

The poem ends with the speaker weeping. But it is no accident that such weeping is rendered, not via onomatopoeia or other proprioceptive language, not as (lower case) voice at all, but as speech. "I wept" is precisely not a "boo hoo", or a "waa waa" or a "sniffle sniffle," which might assert a common idiom with the calf's "snuffing" and the beach's "snuffling," but is an utterance that displaces the animal voice, clears it away, so that the Voice of the poem, "*I* wept," can actualize itself. Thus the animal body of man is denied at the very moment the speaker declares his sympathy with the animal in the poem. Rather than collapsing the organic into the human by way of the speaker's sympathy, "The Bull Calf" effects and polices precisely the separation of animal from human worlds on the basis of a voice that hears itself as a Voice. Structurally, the elision of the semiotic dimen-

sion of the speaker's weeping merely repeats the structure of the poem as a whole whereby the death of the animal occasions the poem's speech, just as the very structure of the phoneme—the essential particular of speech—is predicated on the negation of mere animal sound. In the final analysis, the poem does not deny but finally asserts the speaker's connection to the "black knot of men" who, like him, are first and foremost *speakers*. It is only because of this connection, unwanted and troubling to the speaker, that we can read the poem in terms of an ethical conflict between moral subjects.

We are now in a better position to understand the relation between morality and mortality that haunts Layton's work. Though Appelbaum's aim is to make a case for renewing the power of the voice, of the semiotic, his comment that speech "must be understood in terms of a vocal preoccupation with immortality" is quite useful in this context. Though the "corporeal intelligence knows directly of creaturely death with its power to interrupt life at any stroke" and accepts it, the intelligence enslaved to what he calls speech as "phonemic authority," fears death existentially and compensates by further alienating itself from the organic processes to which it is nevertheless beholden (11). (We recall here the absurd animal's "immortal poem".) "The fear that one could speak no more (death) or that one could speak no more sense (madness) is not a device of conversation, to keep the company up," writes Appelbaum. "Both are its shadows, its phantasms, which appear in dreams and nightmares and which disappear in the release from phonemic sovereignty" (54). For Agamben, too, articulated Voice, predicated as it is upon the death of the animal, carries a trace or "memory" of that negation that foretells the speaker's ultimate destiny: "The voice, as expression and memory of the animal's death, is no longer a mere, natural sign that finds its other outside itself. And although it is not yet meaningful speech, it already contains within itself the power of the negative and of memory" (45).

To the extent that Layton's animal poems have the function of asserting "phonemic sovereignty," they are necessarily shadowed, menaced by madness and death. For this reason, "Cain" (1956), which makes explicit the connection between the death of the animal and the speaker's own sense of mortality, is more typical of Layton's animal poems. More typical, too, is the speaker's active participation in the animal's killing:

> Taking the air rifle from my son's hand,
> I measured back five paces, the Hebrew
> In me, narcissist, father of children,
> Laid to rest. From there I took aim and fired.

> The silent ball hit the frog's back an inch
> Below the head.
> (*A Wild Peculiar Joy* 69)

Here, the axis of initiation is displaced from poet to his son who watches as his father executes a frog with an air rifle. Yet the poem's voice belongs to the speaker and not to the son who stands as silent witness. I have often wondered why this father-and-son poem takes its name from a tale of fratricide. If the speaker-cum-frog assassin is Cain—husbandman, flesh-eater, murderer—who is Abel, his brother? If it is not the boy who remains outside the enacted drama, then it must be the frog itself. In finding his Voice, or at least his occasion to speak, to commit himself to meaning, through the frog's death—a death which is conspicuously inarticulate, "a rapid crescendo / of inaudible sounds and a crone's whispering" (69), and met with further silence from the only other witness to the act, the "old frog behind his weedy moat," who "blink[s] looking self-complacently on" (69)—Cain is the exemplary figure of the (lyric) poet who murders his animal self, his brother self, so as to acquire the language within which he might grasp his own cruelty. Cain, exists—quite literally—only in opposition with the frog, an externalization of the same inhuman substance of which the voice is comprised and which dialectically calls up the Voice that negates it. "Man exists historically only in this tension; he can be human only to the degree that he transcends the anthropomorphous animal which supports him" (Agamben, *History and Infancy* 12). The killer who speaks, Cain is therefore synonymous ethical human subject. Is it not precisely because animals do not talk to us that we absolve them of any kind of moral or ethical responsibility? If nothing else, Cain's language (our lyric poem) indicates his *unnaturalness* and therefore also his accountability; only the human is culpable.

This opposition between human voice and animal sound, in part at least, accounts for the seeming interchangeability of the speaker's animal victim: "But death makes us all look ridiculous. / Consider this frog (dog, hog, what you will) / sprawling. His absurd corpse rocked by the tides […]" (69). Needless to say, the "us" that would appear to assert a commonality with the animal world has by this point already been undercut by the contrast between the animal's inarticulate and unconscious death and the lyrical self's articulate consciousness of his own mortality. It might suffice to say that the Voice is always ironic. Only for Cain, the "absurd animal," is death, too, an "absurdity."

An ironic, and therefore temporal, process, the negation of the voice by Voice institutes, as I suggested above, man's *historicity*, as well as his

humanity: "the human is nothing other than this very passage from pure language to discourse; and this transition, this instant, is history" (Agamben, *Infancy and History* 64).[2] Calling out to the great lost civilizations of "Egypt," "Greece" and "Rome," Cain's speaker asks "would / your mouths open ghostily, gasping out / Among the murky reeds, the hidden frogs, / we climb with crushed spines towards the heavens?" (70). Though the syntax allows for the possibility of human as well as amphibian crippling, the historical as well as the existential dimension of animal murder is clearly established. It is as both an historical being and an ethical subject—ethical because he knows "death as death" (and does so from the moment he chooses to speak)—that the speaker performs this apostrophe.

It is fitting that so much of Layton's "prophetic" work following his 1940s apprenticeship in modernist depersonalization should incorporate apostrophic utterance, no more than this particular apostrophe should follow on the heels of an animal fatality, for the apostrophe, as Jonathan Culler points out, constitutes the tropological core of lyric utterance: "The figure of apostrophe is critical, I think, because its empty 'O', devoid of semantic reference, is the figure of voice, a sign of utterance (40). We need only modify this statement a little to bring it more fully into alignment with the logic I have been pursuing. It is not that the apostrophic 'O' is empty of semantic content, but, on the contrary, that it *empties itself* of mere animal vociferation at the moment that it presents itself to us as a phoneme, that is to say, as a "sign of utterance" proper. In the 'O,' the animal voice—the cry of creaturely death—is negated, and yet remains as dialectical shadow of the human by this very structure.

Before turning to "The Birth of Tragedy," and "A Tall Man Executes a Jig" which I regard as among the greatest of Layton's poetic achievements, I should like to discuss another perennial favourite, "Butterfly on Rock," which appeared in *Balls for a One-Armed Juggler* in 1963. It should now be clear that animal deaths in Layton do not denote or symbolize human deaths. The cows and frogs and badgers are not symbolic people or, as my students repeatedly want to argue, the Jews.[3] Rather, the animal, through its death, ritualizes the advent of speech and the acceptance of something like a human contract. Man is the animal who truly dies, and he is reminded of this through the poem which performs a kind of autopsy on the dead animal, searching in it twisted sinews for something which necessarily resides elsewhere. The animal corpse is in every case the place where the poet no longer is, having spoken. "Butterfly on Rock" perhaps best exemplifies this relationship between voice—the voice of the animal, unphonemic voice—and Voice—the Voice of Consciousness, the voice of being, which

Agamben, following Hegel and Heidegger, asserts is always also the Voice of Death.

> The large yellow wings, black-fringed,
> Were motionless
>
> They say the soul of a dead person
> will settle like that on the still face
>
> But I thought: The rock has borne this;
> this butterfly is the rock's grace,
> its most obstinate and secret desire
> to be a thing alive made manifest
>
> 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.
> (*A Wild Peculiar Joy* 79)

I usually teach this poem as an exploration of what might be called the "dangerous imagination," the poet's faculty for metaphor and its transforming power running roughshod over the reality from which it has become unhinged. In this analysis, I point out the tension between inanimate matter and animate life, between "rock" and "butterfly," which the poem correlates with the body of the "dead person" and the "soul" that lights upon its visage. I then emphasize the word "borne" as the term that initiates the conceit that turns the initial opposition on its head so that the poet, carried away by his own fancy and ignoring the signs of death all around him, kills a living thing and calls it a conception. The poem, I tell my students, is ironic, a meta-lyric. And it is, most certainly, both these things.

But I have arrived at a different understanding of the poem: the opposition between inanimate matter and animate life is most certainly there, but to dwell on it obscures another, perhaps more crucial, tension between speech and silence, or, in what amounts to the same thing, the natural world and the human one, or in what also amounts to the same thing, two kinds of death. In this analysis, the butterfly and the rock are on the *same* side of the equation, separated by a gulf from the speaker and his Voice. The poem

is not simply about the relationship between poetic conceit and the conceitedness of the poet, but about the poet's failed attempt to deny the reality of death, his own eventual death, the idea of which haunts the poem and the speaker from the very beginning. "There is no death in all the land" is clearly *his* "most obstinate and secret desire." And in one sense he is perfectly correct: the butterfly, the shattered porcupines, like the calf and frog before them—all coterminous with the "land"—do not experience "death as death" but merely as the cessation of life; entailed in their demise is not the loss of a subjectivity, but simply the end of life. Truly, there *is* no death in all the *land*. However, the speaker himself is not entitled to this exemption, a fact underscored by the irony of the subsequent line: "There is no death in all the land / *I heard my voice cry.*" The statement is ironic because, "[t]o listen to the voice," as Agamben says, is "to consent also to death" (87). Voice is the very sign of "death as death," or rather, such speaking always takes place under the sign of human mortality. To speak, to have Voice, to give Voice to thought, is to experience mortal time. In listening to his own voice, in "hear[ing] his own voice cry," the speaker thereby thwarts his own declared desires and consents to his death, which both is and is not like that of the butterfly beneath his own hand. If he resists acknowledging the butterfly's death it is because he does not wish to make this bargain, or to acknowledge the irony. But the poem consents on his behalf: the Voice is heard at the very same moment that he brings about the animal's death. In is in the butterfly's place that he speaks.

These poems about the death of the animal and the birth of voice are therefore always also about the staggering reality of death, real death, for the lyrical speaker. Each, in its own way, rehearses the logic of "The Birth of Tragedy," which links the poet's vocation as a speaker—not alongside, but on behalf of and in the space vacated by the animal—with his consciousness of time and the burden of mortality. In that poem, we move inexorably from the first stanza, in which the speaker declares:

> In me, nature's divided things—
> Tree, mould on tree—
> Have their fruition;
> I am their core. Let them swap,
> bandy, like a flame swerve.
> I am their mouth; as a mouth I serve [,]

to the poem's final image where the speaker, "A quiet madman, never far from tears, / […] lie[s] like a slain thing / under the green air the trees / inhabit [….] while someone from afar off / blows birthday candles for the

world" (*A Wild Peculiar Joy* 15). He is nature's "core," but the core itself traces the circumference that separates out the human Voice from the animal sound. As with the bull-calf, the speaker "serves" the natural world, but in such a way that his essential difference from the animal is continually reaffirmed. At most, the speaker is merely "*like* a slain thing;" conscious of his difference from the natural objects that surround him; as a consequence, the speaker is thrown into a particular experience of human time, both "world[ly]" and "tragic."

The pattern is a familiar one: in the final section of the equally masterful "A Tall Man Executes a Jig," the speaker lays himself down alongside a "violated" grass-snake "in fellowship of death" (*A Wild Peculiar Joy* 93). Such choreography undoubtedly establishes a kinship of sorts, but the pantomime is too self-conscious and the vision that follows too vital to maintain that relationship on equal terms. Eventually, necessarily, the man stands up. Rather, it is his awareness of a *difference* between himself and the snake, a difference inscribed in the Voice that is not just a voice, that inspires the poem's final image of the snake who "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 […] / […] transforming all" (93) and validates its realization as a specifically *human* accomplishment.

I am aware that I write this essay in the context of a burgeoning interest in Layton's environmentalism, for which a reification of the animal/human divide may well be anathema. No doubt Layton was a more sensitive and sympathetic observer of the natural world than has sometimes been acknowledged, and no doubt his famous sensualism necessarily foregrounds the corporeal, organic link we share, as embodied creatures, with the animal. Yet, the divide, to me, seems undeniable. Moreover, Layton's ethics would seem to depend on it. As Agamben reminds us, with the Voice comes experience, and with experience, memory, and with memory, responsibility (*Language and Death* 45-47). As readers of Layton are certainly aware, "to remember" is the expressed mandate of many of his most powerful and, indeed, disturbing poems—especially as his interest in the Holocaust and other genocides becomes more explicit in the second half of the 1960s. "I live among amnesiacs" he writes in "To the Victims of the Holocaust," "let me be your parched and swollen tongue / uttering the maledictions / bullets and gas silenced on your lips" (*Fornalutx* 149). Their deaths understood in terms of an imposed silence, the Jewish victims are redeemed, if only in part, by the poet's speech. Such exhortations to speak must also be read alongside Agamben's argument in *Remnants of Aus-*

chwitz: The Witness and the Archive that those who "transform Auschwitz into a reality absolutely separated from language" simply "repeat the Nazis' gesture" which was to force upon their victims an eternal silence (157).[4] Furthermore, if, as Agamben suggests in another context, that "concentration and extermination camps are […] an extreme and monstrous attempt to decide between the human and the inhuman, which has ended up dragging the very possibility of the distinction to its ruin" (*The Open* 22), we might say that poems like "To Victims of the Holocaust," "After Auschwitz," "Runts," "The Lesson," or the shocking "Whom I Write For," which unmask "Man" as "that most dangerous animal of all" (*Fornalutx* 45) find in the "ruin" or erosion—or indeed, forgetting—of the distinction between humanity and animality the gravest of dangers precisely because it conflates two kinds of death, and thereby distorts and demeans the loss of *human* life.

And so death—death as the source of human responsibility—is Layton's greatest theme; if some Canadian poet has written more about death, surely none has written better. As a case in point, let us consider, in conclusion, "Whatever Else Poetry is Freedom," which contains one of Layton's most memorable depictions of human fatality as a "mist" that "rises like the thin voice of grey castratos":

> …….. It lies inside one like a destiny
> A real Jonah it lies rotting like a lung.
> ……
> Mist with the scent of dead apples.
> Mist swirling from black oily waters at evening,
> Mist from the fraternal graves of cemeteries.
>
> It shall drive me to beg my food and at last
> Hurl me broken I know and prostrate on the road;
> Like a huge toad I saw, entire but dead,
> That time mordantly had blackened; O pressed
> To the moist earth it plead for entry.
> I shall be I say that stiff toad for sick with mist
> And crazed I smell the odour of mortality.
> (*A Wild Peculiar Joy* 65)

No one gets out alive. Yet, the poet asserts (thrice) "Whatever else, poetry is freedom." Again, as poet, he is both like and unlike the toad; like, because he is an organism caught in the natural cycles of birth and death; unlike, because he is free as well as dying. More to the point, though: he is

free *because* he is dying. "To experience death as death signifies, in fact, to experience the removal of the voice and the appearance, *in its place*, of another Voice" and along with it, "a person's ownmost and insuperable possibility, the possibility of his *freedom*" (*Language and Death* 86). If a poem ostensibly about freedom spends so much time talking—dare I say s*peaking*—about death, it is because, firstly, Layton understood the inseparability of Voice and mortality and, secondly, he accepted death as the fundamental constraint within which all ethical decisions must necessarily take place. There is no ethical action—the exercising of one's freedom—in the absence of death. Death, in fact, is a generative constraint insofar as it *produces* the ethical subject—or at least his possibility. The animal has no fear of death, but neither is it free to be good—or evil. And it is Layton's disgust at the ingenious ways humankind has devised for squandering its freedom that leads him, sometimes, to regret his gift of speech and wish himself among the dumb and innocent and undying creatures of the world.

Notes

1 Agamben continues: "To experience death as death signifies, in fact, to experience the removal of the voice and the appearance, in its place, of another Voice (presented in grammatical thought as gramma, in Hegel as the Voice of death, in Heidegger as the Voice of conscience and the Voice of being, and in linguistics as a phoneme), which constitutes the originary negative foundation of the human word" (86).

2 The animal is denied historicity for the same reasons. Agamben: "It is clear, therefore, that for a being whose experience of language was not always split into language and speech-in other words, a primordially speaking being, primordially within an undivided language-there would be no knowledge, no infancy, no history: he would already be directly one with his linguistic nature and would nowhere find and discontinuity or difference where any history or knowledge might be produced" (History and Infancy 7).

3 For a reading of Layton's animal victims as surrogates for human victims of genocide, see Emily Essert's "Cruel Creatures: Layton's Animal Poems as a Response to the Holocaust" in this volume.

4 See Brian Trehearne's "Layton as Ethical Subject: The Later Poetry and the Problem of Evil" in this volume for a related treatment of this same passage.

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