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Irving Layton as Teacher: A Memoir

by Irving Wolfe

We are here at this conference to honor and explore the many-faceted life of Irving Layton as poet and supporter of poets and rabble-rouser and editor and leader.[1] I congratulate the English Department of the University of Ottawa for their timely and important initiative in Canadian Literature. For my own part, I have chosen to shed light on a dimension of his life that is rarely mentioned in academic discourse, and that is his powerful role as a teacher. I do this not simply to describe him for posterity, but to illustrate where this leads me—which is to large and important thoughts about the nature of literature and what it is to be a teacher of literature. I think these are critical issues in academia which, half a century after Layton, are hardly ever mentioned, much less ready to be sorted out.

Anybody who has been fortunate enough to encounter a memorable teacher during his education is blessed, for such teachers can be few and far between. I think that Layton was unforgettable—literally. Layton captured the minds of pre-teens and teens, as he did mine, and infused us with a love of and a respect for literature (which I think he sometimes called *liditure*) which has remained with us for the rest of our lives. It must be admitted that few of us have become teachers of literature, and hardly any of us have continued to read Canadian poetry beyond high school, but the mind-broadening and consciousness-expanding effect of Layton upon us when we were but children changed and enhanced us somehow in ways I cannot specify but can nevertheless testify to. I want to begin with that and get it on the record.

I do this because I am told that Layton has suffered a generation of critical neglect."[2] I find this sad—not for Layton, who will be, and at this conference *is*, being resurrected—but for the generation of Can.Lit. students who missed out on meeting him through his work. My feeling about this is simple: Layton's poetry is alive and vibrant and pulsating; it steams with passion and energy because *he* did. Now criticism, in my humble opinion, is too often a lifeless intellectual exercise, a self-serving and rather masturbatory activity designed to further the critic's social (which is to say non-literary) agenda, in oblivion of and blindness to literature. It then becomes a choice between life (poetry) and death (criticism), and to me the decision is easy: if your preferred modish critical apparatus does not allow you to grab onto a poem of Layton's, then throw it in the garbage! We can live

without criticism (and perhaps live better), but we cannot live without literature. Criticism can only feed the pocketbooks of critics, but literature can feed the soul.

Now to my recollections of Layton as teacher. Imagine, if you will, a group of supercilious twelve-year-old students in Herzliah High School in Montreal. We had been together since grade one, and all of us would go on to professional or entrepreneurial careers, unlike my Grade Eleven class at Montreal High, where only 16% even went to university. We were the coolest of the cool—we knew it all, we could do it all and we were afraid of no one. We did the normal English curriculum in half a day rather than one, and the second half was devoted to the Hebrew curriculum, where all the subjects were conducted wholly in Hebrew. Our teachers were honorable and well-meaning adults, but to us they were different, almost a separate species, *not like us.* When Irving Layton arrived, we snorted at his arrogance. We were a bunch of smart-ass Montreal Jewish kids, and *he* was going to teach *us*—ha!

Well, here's what Layton did. One morning, after a snowfall, he arrived with a Russian-style fur hat on his head. We took this, of course, as a challenge to knock it off. Now, imagine what would have happened with an ordinary teacher—"Wolfe, come with me to the principal's office," "Wolfe, bring your father to see me," "Wolfe, you will be punished." What did Layton do? He bent down, made a snowball and threw it back at us. Then he went into the classroom and taught us poetry—and of course we listened! One day, he took us out to the baseball field and offered a quarter to anyone who could catch a fly ball he hit, and a dollar—a dollar!—to anyone who could strike him out. In those days, a quarter would buy you a smoked-meat sandwich and a coke. For a dollar, you could invite three friends and have a feast. Layton was a good athlete—he was an intercollegiate boxer, a fine amateur wrestler, and he had honed his skills playing street hockey with kids, so, as far as I know, no one ever collected the quarter, much less the dollar. But, as before, when we gathered in the classroom afterwards and he talked about a sonnet, we listened! He was a very good-looking man, so all the girls had crushes on him, but the boys had to be won over in more manly ways, and we were. Even when Layton hammered on about grammar—which can be the most boring subject on earth—we paid attention. He would walk up and down the aisles and shout—"Is this an adjective?" "A verb?" He would pick up anything to hand, like one student's leather cap, and hit us over the head if we got it wrong. One day he took a pencil box and used it as a weapon. It's a long wooden box with a sliding top in which the pupils kept their pens, pencils and erasers. There

he was, standing over us, asking about the construction of the sentence. If you didn't know: wham! I am proud to say that I was a victim of Layton's violent physical abuse, but I sure learned my grammar. In the grade eleven matrics, we were obliged to do one test in literature and one in grammar. Well, I passed my grammar exam in grade eleven easily on what Layton had taught us four years earlier in grade seven, and I've never had to study grammar since, so the pounding on my head must have been successful.

It was the same with political and social matters. One year the candidate for the federal government in our area was Fred Rose, a Jew and a professed communist. The principal at Herzliah hated the communists passionately, and so, every morning, after we had lined up in the basement class by class and marched up the stairs two by two to our rooms, the principal waited for us at the first-floor landing. Then he commanded every pair of students as they passed by, boys and girls, to tell our parents not to vote for that horrible *epikoros* Fred Rose. We naturally knew that the idea was preposterous. Would my father drop his convictions merely on the advice of a twelve-year-old? Nonsense. Furthermore, what if my mother disagreed with my father and wanted to vote *her* way? Could I convince the two of them? You must realize that, whenever you have two Jews, you may have at least three opinions or more on almost everything. Here is what Layton did. Remember, he had an M.A. in Economics and Political Science. Well, he sat us down in class and explained to us the differing characteristics of Socialism, Communism and Capitalism, as well as the Canadian parliamentary system. He was a very egalitarian person with everyone, and he spoke to us as equals worthy of the knowledge he was imparting. Did we become fanatical communists or socialists? Not at all. But had we learned a lot about politics quickly and well? You bet we had and, most important and most astonishingly, he left us to make up our own minds.

That is the Layton effect, and it persists. Let me illustrate with an instance from my undergraduate years. Layton had had frequent contact in the 1940's with the poets F.R. Scott and A.J.M. Smith. He dubbed them Wolf Cub and Boy Scout, and the relations were not always friendly. One day he wrote a poem, "Imaginary Conversation," about their opinion of him:

Art said to Frank:
'Layton's verse is mostly
fart for fart's sake.'

Someone who overheard him
said with a twinkle:
'What's wrong with fart, Art?

It's a sort of ecstasy
and most emphatically
both an event and a signal.'
(*Waiting for the Messiah* 237, emphasis in original)

Aside from the physiological enjoyment of robust body functions, Layton speaks of the fart allegorically as a statement of existence and pleasure and derision, mocking and dismissing the better-bred but squeamish attitude of his bloodless detractors. It is, for all the rudeness of its metaphor, a thoughtful poem.

Now, I was seventeen when I entered McGill, and was therefore brimming with certainty and confidence. One day I engaged in a rather heated debate about poetry with some (far less knowledgeable) fellow students over lunch at the Union. When I returned to the library, and remembering the Layton poem I have just quoted, I wrote the following bit of verse in the spirit of the master.

Writing a good poem
is like having a good shit.
When you are through
there is a feeling of satisfaction and achievement
not just an odor.

It is a haiku and I was rather pleased. It encapsulated my viewpoint concisely and I may say pungently, so I sent it to the student newspaper. To my surprise they did not print it, and I mulled over the sad lack of enlightenment to be found in those quarters of the student population unexposed to the radiance of Layton.

Layton's poetry, as we all know, especially the stuff written before perhaps 1955, is often aggressive, blunt and obscene, and this must be explored. A poem that I remember from my grade-school days runs like this:

How delicately
the Englishwoman
scratches her rectum.

Firmly, yet gently,
and with what a regard
for the decencies.

Centuries
of imperial rule
inform that touch.
("O.B.E." *Fornalutx* 64)

It is a sort of Haiku and a perfect example of Layton's depiction of poetry as going "from rage to wisdom." When I first read it at age 12 I was amazed—look, the teacher writes just like we talk among the guys on the street! I have never forgotten it, and it has become for me a sort of litmus test, a touchstone of a person's essence. When I meet someone who purports to be a Laytonite, I quote the poem. If I see a glint in the person's eyes, a smile of recognition, then he is kindred. If he grimaces is distaste, then he belongs in Ontario.

One day, a few years ago, I was in Toronto, and I took the time to visit a former Layton student. He was by now an important television mogul and rather rich. My purpose in meeting him was to propose that he found a project to do a series of filmed or audio interviews with former Layton students across North America, who might provide the sort of revealing anecdotes I am presenting here, which would then be assembled into an archive on mid-century Canadian poetry to be made available to future Can.Lit. researchers. When we met I quoted the test poem and he smiled in recognition. He even corrected a word I had used mistakenly, and here we were, two middle-aged men, neither of us having read the poem in fifty years, but having it fresh in our memories like yesterday. It was carved into our minds. He did not agree to pay for the project, however, saying that since I had the passion, I should do it. I would have liked to retort that I might have the passion, but he has the money, but wisely I said nothing. Now, I have proposed this project twice to several people at a major university in Montreal, and have received expressions of interest each time, but so far no concrete action has been taken, so I am putting forth a plea here at this conference: will someone somewhere get off his or her butt and do this! There are many ex-students, a large number in Montreal alone, and I think it could be valuable, but time is passing. Get it?

As a further illustration of his long-lasting effect on his students, I attended a Bar Mitzvah celebration in Montreal a few years ago and found myself sitting next to someone who turned out to be a former Layton student as well. He was a successful entrepreneur, a man of affluence and

influence, and he told me that he was going to visit Layton the next morning. I agreed at once to join him, and so the next day we set off, gray-haired professor and wealthy financier, on a pilgrimage to visit the master. He was at an old-people's home, and we met outside on a terrace. That was but two years before his death, and at the age of 90 he suffered from full dementia. He did not know who we were, nor where he was, but there was Layton, still quite robust, his thick hair intact but now all white. He greeted us courteously and we sat and talked. Then my colleague asked Musia, Layton's constant companion, if we could each get a certain book of poetry. She went back to his room, obtained the copies and returned, and he signed them in a shaky but recognizable hand. Next, my fellow acolyte asked if Layton could read one of his poems aloud and he agreed. In a moment he began, and I sat there in the morning sunshine, amazed. Layton may not have been aware of his surroundings, but he spoke the poem with perfect understanding, pausing and emphasizing according to the meaning. I said to myself, "I am in grade seven again, and Layton is reading poetry to us just like before." The voice had hardly changed, and the intensity on his face was as of old. Then something even more amazing occurred. Suddenly, Layton paused and seemed disturbed about the text—a word or letter, he said, was incorrect. Musia went to get an older text, and upon comparison it turned out that Layton was right; there was indeed an error in the newer book. Think of what this means: he had probably never read the poem since he wrote it some sixty years before, but every word was etched into his mind from the moment of composition, and even in his confused state decades later he remembered it totally. This tells us something about the poet and poetry—the poem comes out of the artist's soul and is part of his being forever after. It also tells us how best to appreciate Layton's poems. They must be recited aloud and slowly, not read, and preferably to a second person. They are verbal music, not written, as are all the great poems of the past, and each, I think, is intended to be heard, to be absorbed by the ear. So many of today's poems are a display of configuration on the page, but a Shakespeare sonnet or Shelley or Yeats is best taken in units of sound.

A word must be said here about Layton's consistent attack, particularly in the first phase of his career, on the Philistinism or Babbitry of WASP Canada. In many people's minds even today this is considered a defect of character, somehow ungentlemanly and unjustifiably excessive—perhaps simply an assault by Montreal on Toronto. I rather prefer to explain it this way: in, let us say 1955, Montreal had balls, Toronto had none (and perhaps still doesn't). Layton had balls to spare, so he would therefore thrive

in Montreal but abhor Toronto, for it represented for him a component of Canadian culture he vigorously disliked. Remember that at that time Toronto had the only-half-joking nickname "Toronto-the-Good," halo and all. Layton could never live under a halo, *ergo* his contempt and fury. I contend that this rage is justified, even laudatory, for it is my opinion that, to any right-thinking person, bashing Toronto is not merely a pleasure but a duty—it is what keeps us free of blind, unthinking Anglophilia. It is what allows us to be ourselves, to be Canadian in whatever form we choose. I would therefore say that Layton's fierce demolition of WASP gentility and robotic character makes him not a (typical) uncivilized Montreal brute but a great Canadian patriot. In his wild pagan scatological outbursts he was the first, the most bravely advanced point-man, in the charge against the reactionary deadening drag of Brit idolatry and bourgeois timidity. This was a powerful cultural force that sought to put us down in Canada and thereby to keep us safely enslaved to what I would call the Ontario world-view, which was, and in part still is, a foreign-oriented, backward-looking, elitist, chauvinist and bigoted ideology. It was not good for us. Canada needed a swift kick in the pants in mid-century to propel us out of that stultifying rut, and Layton above anyone else is the one who did it, so I take my hat off to him—Viva Layton the Liberator! He repatriated the writing of poetry as Trudeau did our constitution, and high time too. He took it from the Brits and allowed Canadian poetry to be Canadian.

Such aggression can have its consequences. In the late 1960's, when I began teaching at the Université de Montréal, Layton approached me. He asked me without humility to look into getting him a job, even part time, in our department. I spoke at once to our then-chairman, a Canadianist himself. What a coup, I thought. We could have Canada's best-known poet at that time teaching poetry to our students, especially in our department which saw itself as a bridge between the Francophone and Anglophone cultures right here in Quebec. After a few weeks, the Chairman told me his decision: there was no place for Layton in our curriculum. As he said it I felt I saw his face contort in disgust, as if the mere mention of Layton's name to this WASP Ontarian was like seeing dog-poop. It may not have been much, but I feared the long arm of Brit anger had taken its revenge.

Happily this was not so, for an important moment in the evolution of the teaching of Canadian poetry in mid-century was Layton's move to York University in the early 1970s. When I heard about it, I wondered laughingly what would happen: Layton, the Montreal bull, entering Toronto, the WASP China shop. At a celebration in Montreal a few years later on the occasion of Layton's 80th birthday, I found out. Several people came from

Toronto, and two in particular were very revealing. They were young academics who spoke of their encounters with Layton as more than eye-opening, as transformational, revelatory and uplifting, giving a new purpose to their careers and helping them to mature in marvellous ways. These testimonies are important not only for Layton the man but for the way they taught poetry as a result of his character. There may be a filmed record of this event, and, if it can be obtained, it should be filed here in this Department, which seems to have set itself up as specializing in Can.Lit. I must say I was rather impressed when, at lunch, I met two members of the Department who had not only read but liked Dudek's very long poem *Europe.* Such people are few and far between.

What I best remember is his absolute sincerity. To know Layton is to never be superficial or frivolous. Our profession, as I see it, has been a succession of regnal theories, each replacing the one before but being replaced in its turn: structuralism to post-structuralism to deconstruction to new historicism to new feminism and new Marxism and gay and lesbian and sexual studies, to ecocritism and literary Darwinism. I prefer to call this the "Ismic Universe," but I do not see any of it as important for literature. To me it is a parallel universe which exists alongside literature but does not help to sustain it. Criticism rather feeds off literature like a parasite giving nothing to its host. I strenuously reject this. Layton showed us with every fiber of his body that literature is to be valued on its own, and not just as the supine arena for the Ismist's performance upon it, like meat laid out upon a dissecting table. In contrast to the Ismic view, I would present to you two very different terms by which to approach literature: they are Beauty and Awe. Awe or respect for literature, because not many of us in this room can compose a good symphony or paint a good painting or write a good sonnet, and Beauty or an awareness of the facility and grace that the great artist in any medium can produce.

I propose not only that we regard great literature as great, but, equally heretically, that we see ourselves as teachers of great literature and not as zealots proselytizing for every new Ism. Freud said that the artist engages in a transaction with his audience. He seduces them with beauty so he can convey his message, which is the hard medicine inside the sugar-coated pill. Freud himself was in awe, not knowing how the artist produces his beauty, and so should we be. We are teachers, not critics, and our duty is to serve the work, not to make it serve us. The word "criticism" is not merely a misnomer but a hindrance. There *are* critics, these who evaluate a new play or musical or novel. Their job is to criticize, but teachers of *Othello* are not paid to tell us whether it is a great play or not. They are there to

explicate the play, to involve the students into it. They are matchmakers: "Mr. Student, meet Mr. Shakespeare." As I often put it to my undergraduate students, first you wrestle with Shakespeare—you get down and dirty and sweaty —but then, if your teacher is helpful, you relax and play with Shakespeare. When you learn some of the rules of *his* game, you may begin to see what it is to dance with Shakespeare, and then the ultimate, to fly with Shakespeare. That is exhilarating—to really connect. It is the ideal and aim of the good teacher, and Layton taught me that.

Now to sum up. If I have to define Layton's legacy, I will do so first in terms of teaching. He saw teaching as honorable and essential. It is an echo of his Judaic heritage, where the teacher is respected as fulfilling a supremely important role. He is the inheritor and therefore the sustainer of the culture, the keeper of the flame. I emphasize this because this function of teaching has been largely ignored in a world of academic focus on literary criticism as an industry. To Layton, literature was primary, not secondary, first and not last, and we must see to it in his honor that we make the last first. Literature is the alpha and the omega, and criticism is a tool to explore the territory but never, never, never an end in itself. As Layton felt, we must be forever responsive to the aliveness of literature, its being and its intensity, its uniqueness, being made of the blood and passion, the heart's core, the burning essence of the creator laid down in word or music or paint or dance. We therefore who are privileged to teach it must see ourselves as media between sender and receiver, as persons who serve the artist and his vision and thereby art and thereby human creativity. We cannot do it ourselves, but we *can* help make it live. Layton was artist *and* teacher, but those of us who can only teach have yet a critical role to play.

It is my belief that Irving Layton took Canadian poetry by the short hairs and dragged it kicking into the twentieth century. Had he not done so, what would we have had? Carman and Lampman, Birney and Pratt? I put these sorts of poets, despite their talent, under one category—WASP gentility. Polite musings and gentle thoughts, which to me is mostly stilted poetry with real humanity extracted. Some of it is quite repressed and constipated, choked, with only a gurgle emitted. Layton the Montreal Jew, in total contrast, roars and screams and shrieks and chants and laughs and sings and guffaws—and calls to us. No one else in Canada at that time dared to do this. He broke through to new shores, opened new territory, new lands to be tasted, and no one else would have rushed in where he did not tread. Was he a fool for this, or saviour, an angel or a devil? You must decide but, whatever else, his poetry is alive, visceral, beating and bleeding with human feelings of man, the passionate animal. Was he excessive? Yes.

Was he offensive? Yes. Eccentric? That too. But was he real and vital and *necessary*? Hell, yes! Layton was a howling storm who said yes to the truth, *all* the truth, and we are the better for it. Our artistic life would be black and white without him.

What then is Layton's place in the pantheon of Can.Lit.? He will and surely deserves to have one, but, as several speakers have mentioned, it will be multiple: as poet and editor and publisher and supporter of poets and agitator and media star and bad boy and now, as I have argued, as teacher. All of these combine to give him a central and enduring role in modern Canadian poetry in the twentieth century that cannot be gainsaid if justice prevails. Canadian poetry in the twentieth century cannot be understood or appreciated without an awareness of his presence. Despite attempts to erase him by those who find his persona repugnant, he will always be the elephant in the room, an inescapable identity as muckraker, rabble-rouser, gadfly, pioneer. Can.Lit. has been forever enhanced by his existence. In life, as in the classroom, Layton maintained a perpetual and undiminished, almost-childlike enthusiasm for life and honesty of spirit. He treated everything with joy and expected it from everyone else, including his many students. What I have tried to do today is to infuse the people here, especially those graduate students shortly to enter upon a teaching career, with some of Layton's soul and spirit, to transmit to them what he gave to me, to pay it forward in gratitude and hope. Good bye, Irving. I, for one, will never forget you.

Notes

1 This is a transcript of Prof. Wolfe's remarks at "Whatever Else: an Irving Layton Symposium," held May 3-5, 2013 in Ottawa. [eds.]

2 From the call for papers for the symposium. [eds.]

Works Cited

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