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Editors' Introduction: Reading Irving Layton in the 21st Century

*And poems that love the truth tell
All things have value being combustible.*
—Irving Layton, “Esthetique”

Irving Layton, once a towering figure both nationally and internationally (he was nominated jointly by Italy and South Korea for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1981), has been the subject of dwindling scholarly interest since the mid-1980s. Several factors partially account for this fact. In Canada, the teaching and practice of literary criticism underwent a radical transformation in the last two decades of the 20th century, when poststructuralist, post-modernist, feminist and postcolonial approaches began to displace the biographical and New Critical modes of enquiry that had dominated approaches to Layton's work until that time. Not only were Layton's themes less easily accommodated within these emergent critical approaches, but, as a predominantly lyrical practice, his work was susceptible to attack within the domain of theoretical poetics where the idea that lyric was at best *passé*, and at worst dangerously reactionary, was increasingly taken for granted. Nor did Layton's own tendency toward the tendentious in matters political, the illiberal in matters of sex and gender, and the immodest in matters biographical help promote an interest in his work either among his contemporaries or subsequent generations.

So it is that Layton, despite a truly prodigious fifty-year career as a poet, publisher, and cultural critic, is currently understudied and undervalued in the field as it stands. Since the release of Elspeth Cameron's biography of the poet in 1986, there have been fewer than a dozen critical articles or book chapters published that directly consider Layton. Though Layton's work is the focus of a recent article by George Elliott Clarke and receives prominent attention in Joel Deshayé's *The Metaphor of Celebrity: Canadian Poetry and the Public 1955-1980*, published this year, there is little else besides Norman Ravvin's contribution to *Language Acts: Anglo-Quebec Poetry, 1976 to the 21st Century* from 2007 and Brian Trehearne's long chapter in *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition* from 1999 that one might point to as valuable recent scholarship.

This issue of *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* collects original research first presented at *Whatever Else: An Irving Layton Symposium* which took place at the University of Ottawa from May 3-5, 2013. Our

theme was prompted by several factors. 2012 was the centenary of Layton's birth and was marked by a series of informal events across the country celebrating his life and work. These events briefly returned Irving Layton to public visibility for the first time since his death in January 2006. These numerous public occasions, however, obscured the fact of the decades-long critical silence surrounding Layton and his body of work. The goal of the Symposium was to remedy this situation and to justify the continuing relevance of Layton's contribution to Canadian literature and society by way of an examination of his work from a variety of novel perspectives. The Symposium proceedings balanced work geared towards the reappraisal of a career and those breaking new ground by reading Layton and his work in the context of questions and methodologies that have emerged during the period of his neglect. The practical effect of the Symposium has been two-fold: (1) it produced a credible and relevant body of new criticism on the poet (as evidenced by this collection); and (2) it challenged the discourse of Canadian literary criticism by way of addressing a figure and a body of work that for almost two generations has proved resistant to the prevailing modes of critical analysis in the field.

The papers gathered here represent research from senior, recently established, and emerging scholars—including graduate students and recent PhDs. They focus, variously, on Layton's celebrity, his collaborations, his relationship with Montreal, his interaction with American poets, his attitude towards and use of animals in his poetry, and the place of the Holocaust in his literary and moral universe. Despite the broad range of topics and approaches represented here, a single theme nevertheless predominates: *ethics*. A profoundly philosophical writer, Layton left a body of work imbued with the questions of how to act justly in a world seemingly dominated by senseless violence, and of how to live meaningfully when life is menaced by death and negativity. At the Symposium, Brian Trehearne delivered the keynote address entitled "Layton as Ethical Subject: The Later Poetry and the Problem of Evil"—the text of which has been expanded and revised for publication here. Informed by the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben and Friedrich Nietzsche, his discussion of Layton's preoccupation with evil (incarnated, for Layton, in the Holocaust and other genocides)—and his struggle to find a language adequate to that preoccupation—speaks to concerns underlying a number of the essays in this issue, notably those by Emily Essert and Robert David Stacey which read Layton's poems of animal cruelty in relation to the Holocaust and "the voice of conscience," respectively.

Historically, culturally, morally and aesthetically imbedded in Layton's poetic identity, the Holocaust—despite the poet's reluctance to address it

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directly before the 1960s—looms large in number of the essays collected here. Besides those essays by Trehearne, Essert and Stacey, Norman Ravin's paper examines Layton's engagement with the Montreal Jewish community in the years immediately following the Holocaust via a reading of Layton's early poetry and short fiction, detailing both the broad misunderstanding of this work at the time of its publication and the critical silence surrounding it since.

Layton was not only a poet, but was also a teacher and prominent public figure. Joel Deshayé's essay explores Layton's public performances on Canadian television at the height of his fame, which coincided with the emergence of a national mass media, with an eye to tracing tensions between his various personae and styles. Zachariah Wells places Layton in relation to the Black Mountain poetics of Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, illuminating Layton's fraught yet productive relationship with this American movement more commonly associated with *Tish* and subsequent generations of Canadian poets. Cameron Anstee's contribution suppresses Layton in order to explore the cast of exceptional figures involved in the material production of Layton's work at McClelland & Stewart during his years of greatest public visibility (1959-1964). These scholarly essays are complemented by two personal memoirs: one from Donald Winkler describing his experiences with Layton through his role as documentary filmmaker, and one from Irving Wolfe describing the powerful and lasting impact Layton's teaching had on young students in the 1950s and 1960s.

We believe that these essays constitute a major contribution to the understanding of Irving Layton's writing, but also to the study of Canadian poetry and to literary modernism more broadly. Moreover, these essays demonstrate a number of new approaches to Layton's work that we hope will provoke further scholarly work. This collection, like the symposium that inspired it, has borrowed its title from one of Layton's best-known and admired poems, "Whatever Else Poetry is Freedom." As Brian Trehearne notes in his essay here, the title is itself a "mockery of closure" and the poem revels in the contradictions and ambiguities and, indeed, possibilities granted by human expression. Likewise, we trust that the following pages will forestall any final judgment on the meaning and significance of Layton's work and career, while underlining its importance. Our deepest gratitude is due to this volume's contributors for their efforts on behalf of a vital and ever-possible Layton.

Cameron Anstee and Robert David Stacey