

The "I/Eye" of Irving Layton:
The Poetic, Masculine and Prophetic Ways of Seeing.

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ABSTRACT

The "I/Eye" of Irving Layton: The Poetic, Masculine and Prophetic Ways of Seeing

Daniel Goodwin

Two of the most noteworthy characteristics of Layton's poetry are his reliance on the literary device of the persona and a preoccupation with the act of looking. Layton's three major personae are those of poet, lover and prophet. Each of these personae has a particular way of seeing and a corresponding object of vision. The poetic "I/Eye" evaluates the poetic imagination, the masculine "I/Eye" surveys women, and the prophetic "I/Eye" focuses on the nature of human evil.

The poetic "I/Eye" attempts to reconcile the tension between the universal and the subjective. The poet wishes to speak for, and to, all humanity but his self-acclaimed superior imaginative faculty alienates him. The poetic vision is portrayed as artificial and unsuccessful. The masculine "I/Eye" objectifies women and denies them the male prerogative of artistic vision. The prophetic "I/Eye" decries evil while simultaneously showing his complicity through his inability to confront violence.

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List of Abbreviations

(The following is a list of abbreviations of Irving Layton's books, as they appear in this thesis:)

- SP.....The Shattered Plinths/ 1968
CPIL.....The Collected Poems of Irving Layton/ 1971
TD.....The Tightrope Dancer/ 1978
DH.....Droppings From Heaven/ 1979
FMNH.....For My Neighbours In Hell/ 1980

INTRODUCTION

When William Carlos Williams wrote his introduction to Layton's collected poems The Improved Binoculars in 1956, he set the tone for the criticism that was to follow. Williams begins by asking the rhetorical question: "What else are you going to say about a man whose work you wholeheartedly admire than that he is a good poet?" (52). Although Williams contradicts himself when he proceeds to fulfil what Kildare Dobbs has termed the role of "professional cheer-leader" (Dobbs 58), the level of his analysis does not rise. We are treated to such penetrating observations as the following: "[Layton] inhabits the medium and is at home in it... he has eyes and he has power to penetrate wherever its (sic) lust leads him to satisfy his hungers.... He laughs from a full belly" (52). The penultimate sentence reads: "With his vigor and abilities who shall not say that Canada will not have produced one of the west's most famous poets?" (Williams 53).

And so Williams set the parameters for a debate that has by and large confined itself to the question of whether Layton is a good poet or a bad poet, and in its more probing moments addresses the issue of which are his good poems and which are his bad ones. As a result of this type of evaluative approach, almost a review mentality, both the poet and the criticism have suffered. In some of its manifestations it has led to Louis Dudek's insisting that Layton "is not 'a major

voice'...nor 'the most powerful Canadian poet'... nor 'the generation's finest'" (Dudek 91). And, after Woodcock's 1966 essay "A Grab at Proteus: Notes on Irving Layton," in which he counts thirty-five poems out of the three hundred and eighty-five in Collected Poems (1965) as "complete and moving achievements" (157), critics have argued over the number with the same enthusiasm as theologians debating the question of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

Fortunately, literary criticism has moved somewhat beyond this good/bad dichotomy, making it possible to approach Layton in a more contemporary light. And yet, like most new angles, my exploration is rooted in the interstices of the old. Perhaps the most useful remark Williams makes in his introduction is that "Layton has eyes...." In his introduction to Irving Layton: The Poet and His Critics, Seymour Mayne hints at the centrality of the visual for Layton:

Williams was attuned to the sound and music of poetry—that was the primary sense. Layton's eye was his first sense and Williams' concerns grow out of a particularist American bias. He acknowledges Layton's eclecticism in the choosing of forms and patterns of the poems on the page, but he does not concede that Layton's innovations and technical strengths lie in his visual imagination, and with his complexity of vision and theme. (10)

Others have written about Layton's "vision" and it is here that they are pointing the way for my present research. The critics who discuss Layton's "vision" are using the term in the loosest sense, as when one speaks of a writer's vision: simply, how he or she views the world. Thus, Wynne Francis explores Layton's Nietzschean vision, Eli Mandel stresses the thematic unity of Layton's vision and Seymour Mayne writes of Layton's circular vision in which "[e]ach phase of Layton's poetry moves out from an initial stance and vision, and then completes itself in a manner that offers a new point of departure" (Irving Layton: The Poet and His Critics 2). But in writing of Layton's vision in the most general sense, the critics have ignored its particular sense: as physically seeing.

Layton's poems, especially in the years 1945-1968, are noteworthy for the frequency with which they make the reader conscious of the fact that the poet is seeing something. The poems are defined by the presence of the verb "to see" and its synonyms: watch, observe, look, mark, gaze, stare, note, glance, glimpse. Most often it is specifically the poet who is seeing and there are numerous references to the power of the poet's eyes. The poet describes his eyes as "convincing" ("June Weather" CPIL 79), "fictive" ("The Fictive Eye" CPIL 218), "open" ("At Desjardins" CPIL 261), "cool aware" ("Mahogany Red" CPIL 402). He refers to his "X-ray eyes" ("Like A Mother Demented" CPIL 471), "alert three-storey eyes"

("Grey Morning In Lisbon" CPIL 553), and to his "amazed and deathless eyes" ("Apocalypse" FMNH 1). This emphasis on vision, which figures so prominently in Layton's work, alerts us to the nature and the consequences of the poet's gaze.

The concept of Layton's "eye" is rendered more complex by his extensive use of the "I" as the persona in his poetry. Layton's personae, while often listed and alluded to, have rarely been systematically examined in the body of criticism, and yet Seymour Mayne, in his introduction to Irving Layton: The Poet and His Critics, stresses the importance of the persona in determining the vision:

The persona of the poet is often involved in the action of the poem, and the various "I"s interact with the other elements of the poem. The urgency of the persona intensifies the statement and vision. (14)

Here vision is again being used in its loose poetic sense. But what Mayne is alluding to, without noting all the implications, is that the "I" of the poet determines the "eye" of the poem.

The near ubiquity of the "I" in Layton's poetry has engendered mixed reactions. Mervin Butovsky considers the "I" to be indispensable to Layton's projection of his vision:

From his earliest poems, Layton's work has always

depended on the forceful presentation of a self- in all its protean guises- as the essential vehicle for communication. (114)

Occasionally, however, the prevalence of the "I" has been regarded as an irredeemable flaw in Layton's poetry. In the course of his review of Collected Poems (1965), Louis Dudek wonders, "[W]hat was it in the poetry that so repelled me?" (144), and then provides the following analysis:

The real reason I think it is impossible to deal with Irving Layton's poetry as poetry is that it consists almost entirely of dramatizations of his own ego.... It is impossible to separate Irving Layton- or Layton as he sees himself- from any poetic or artistic content proper. I have actually counted the number of poems in this book in which the grandiose "I" figures as the dominant actor: there are 306 of them. (145)

As other critics have recognized, the persona is not constrained by the poems themselves. F.W. Watt begins his 1972 review of The Collected Poems of Irving Layton by acknowledging Layton's construction of both his poetic and his public personae:

Here we have the Poet as Actor. I am not referring now

to the acting outside the poetry: though probably no one since Bliss Carman has so fully taken for himself the role of Poet in front of Canadian audiences. (208)

As Mayne notes, a number of critics have confused Layton's public persona with the poetic one since at least the mid-fifties:

From then on, [Layton's] presence made itself felt upon the literary scene so that criticism is often directed at the public personality and the response sidesteps his poems and literary achievement.

(Irving Layton: The Poet and His Critics 1)

In spite of this occasional inability or unwillingness on the part of critics to distinguish Layton's public personae from his poetic personae, the two can be separated and contrasted on the basis of vision. If in his poetic personae Layton is concerned with the act of *seeing*, in his public persona he is preoccupied with *being seen*.

Layton views the poet primarily as a seer, in the sense of one who is more aware than the average person, and also in the sense of one who recognizes and decries evil. In commenting on modern poets, Layton accuses them of losing sight of the fact that "they are prophets and the descendants of prophets..." (Engagements 105). Within his poetry, Layton

affirms his affinity with the Old Testament prophets. "On Seeing the Statuettes of Ezekiel and Jeremiah in the Church of Notre Dame" depicts an "I" who has joined up the prophetic brotherhood:

I shall not leave you here incensed, uneasy
among alien Catholic saints
but shall bring you from time to time
my hot Hebrew heart
as passionate as your own, and stand
with you here awhile in aching confraternity. (CPIL 32)

This seer persona is the one who invokes the act of seeing, as in "The Improved Binoculars": "*I saw steeples fall on their knees./ I saw an agent kick the charred bodies...*" (CPIL 139) (my italics).

In his public persona, however, Layton shifts the burden of seeing to his reader. He thrusts himself to centre-stage, transforming himself in the process from the viewer to the viewed. This near obsession with presenting himself and determining how he is seen has manifested itself concretely on the cover jackets of his books. Where poets are often content with a photo on the inside leaf or on the back cover, eleven of Layton's poetry volumes feature photographs of him on their front covers. In a review of The Improved Binoculars, Kildare Dobbs alludes to Layton's obsession with constructing and

presenting an image of himself. Dobbs comments on the book cover:

It bears on its cover a photograph of Mr. Layton looking suitably fierce and sleepless, displaying impressively hairy forearms and clutching a book bearing on its cover a photograph of Mr. Layton etc.... (58)

Layton's determination to be seen could make him the object of one of his more serious charges: despite his reiteration that many modern poets have forgotten their prophetic mission and have swapped roles with "entertainers and culture-peddlers" (Engagements 105), he has occasionally constructed the role of the poet in his poems, and his own public role, as a sort of entertainer. Indeed, the titles of three of his books depict the poet in the guise of an athletic showman: Balls for a One-Armed Juggler, The Tightrope Dancer and The Polevaulter.

In Layton's poetry, the figure of the poet is sometimes presented as actor, clown or acrobat, performing for an audience. The poetic "I" of "Whatever Else Poetry is Freedom" swivels on his "wooden stilts," while he polevaults over his grave in "The Polevaulter." In "The Tightrope Dancer," the poetic "I" balances on a tightrope strung tautly between love and death. And in "Seven O'Clock Lecture," Layton depicts the poetic "I" as lecturer, lamenting his inability to change his

audience's sense that poetry, with its "immortal claptrap.../
These singular lies with the power/ to get themselves
believed" is little more than make believe (CPIL 110). The
"I" at the front of the class questions his ends and means:
"God! God! Shall I jiggle my gored haunches/ to make these
faces laugh?" (CPIL 111)

Layton has elaborated on some of these images of the poet
as entertainer in his prose. In the foreword to The Tightrope
Dancer, he draws a distinction between the poet as actor and
the critic as spectator:

The poet, either through genes or genius, is poised on a
rope stretched tautly between sex and death. The major
poet dances on the tightrope; the minor poet walks warily
across it. The non-poet or poetaster, rapidly becoming
one of this country's major homegrown products, doesn't
even make a try at either. The literary scholar and the
critic remain, of course, solidly and securely on the
ground, fussily adjusting their binoculars and peering
intently through them, once they have found what they
believe is the right focus for watching the performance
on the tightrope. (9)

Ironically, the scholars are the ones using binoculars, a key
symbol in Layton's poem "The Improved Binoculars" for the
superior vision of the poet. The difference here is that

presumably the critics and the scholars are only using ordinary, unimproved binoculars. In addition, the poet is looking directly at life while the scholar is at one remove, looking at the poet looking at life. It is the problems with Layton's distinction between the poet and the critic that lie at the root of his poetic personae.

In his war against the critic, the enemy has been saddled with the pet Laytonian epithets: castrato, impotent, joyless, etc. In his more reflective moments, Layton has attempted to explain the difference in the following terms: "Unlike the scholar or literary historian who writes about life, the poet enjoys it, *lives it*" (Engagements 87). The problems with this assumption begin with the pedantic observation that we all live life by definition, critic included, and lead to the inescapable conclusion that while the critic might remain a rung below the poet, the poet is still at one remove from life because he or she is the one who *writes* about life. Within Layton's poetry, this insight translates into the "I" being more often an observer than an actor.

Milton Wilson lists the poet and the lover as Layton's primary poetic "selves" (Wilson 92), and Woodcock recognizes the major persona of prophet (160). Taken together, these three are Layton's major personae, for which the personae of actor, acrobat and juggler function merely as a literary form of stunt double. The figure of athletic entertainer is used to perform actions which the poetic personae are not equipped

or qualified for. While the personae of actor, acrobat, juggler, are "actors" in both senses of drama and action, the personae of poet, lover and prophet are spectators. The poet does not live life so much as he observes and daydreams it; the lover does not sleep so frequently with women as he observes them; and the prophet looks passively at evil instead of fighting it. Despite Layton's attempt to portray himself as actor, the major act which he performs for his reader is the act of looking.

In his book Ways of Seeing, John Berger discusses the way in which vision performs a relative function, in the sense of establishing the viewer's relation to what is viewed:

We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach- though not necessarily within arm's reach. To touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it. (8)

A study of Layton's personae reveals the manner in which their respective ways of seeing help to situate themselves in relation to various aspects of the world. Layton sees the world largely through a poetic "I/Eye," a masculine "I/Eye" and a prophetic "I/Eye." The poetic "eye" distances the poetic "I" from the rest of humanity, showing him to be different because of his faculty of imagination, while also

showing his view to be inadequate and unreal. The masculine "eye" identifies the masculine "I" with men in general while simultaneously alienating him from women. Women are seen by the masculine "eye" as inferior to men because they are objects of vision rather than viewers in their own right. The prophetic "eye," while continuing to distinguish the prophetic "I" from the rest of humanity on the basis of vision and imagination, also identifies the prophetic "I" with corrupt humanity by revealing him to be implicated in the evil that he sees.

The use of the three "I/Eyes" provides Layton with a method of evaluating, to different degrees, the "poetic," "masculine," and "prophetic" ways of seeing. Layton is perhaps most aware of the weaknesses in his prophetic gaze. He is also, to a great degree, aware of the incompleteness of his poetic gaze. Layton is, however, completely unaware of the shortcomings of his masculine gaze. When Layton employs both his poetic and prophetic personae, he engages in an implicit critique of his position. There is no such self-critique when he employs his masculine gaze.

CHAPTER I

THE POETIC "I/EYE": SUBJECTIFYING THE UNIVERSAL

In her essay "The Vocabulary of the 'Universal': The Cultural Imperialism of the Universalist Criteria of Western Literary Criticism," Arun Mukherjee deconstructs what she terms a "valorized term in the western liberal humanist criticism": the concept of a universalist aesthetic (11). She criticizes the practice in which writers from the non-western or developing world are praised when their writing is seen to have universal appeal and argues they are actually being applauded for something else: for concerning themselves with issues which are specific to the Western world.

Mukherjee defines universalist criteria as those which "totally overlook the historical, time and place specific experience of a people in their insistence that life in Nigeria is more or less similar to life in the metropolitan centres of the western world because of the essential brotherhood of man" (11).

Mukherjee is critical of the formulation of the concept of universality and she disagrees with Northrop Frye's following statement in which he identifies an increasingly homogeneous world literature:

A world like ours produces a single international style of which all existing literatures are regional

developments. This international style is not a bag of rhetorical tricks but a way of seeing and thinking in a world controlled by uniform patterns of technology, and the regional development is a way of escaping from that uniformity. (12)

Mukherjee refers derisively to the "existentialist-universalist lamentations on the 'human condition'" which ostensibly blur distinctions between human experience (13).

According to Mukherjee, the standards used to discuss and judge literary works coming from the Western tradition are inadequate to discuss and evaluate those works from outside the dominant tradition. Referring to the universalist approach, Mukherjee writes:

...it remains silent about institutional exploitation, caste and class domination, and economic and political neo-colonialism, issues which cannot be resolved at the individual level through a personal growth in maturity. These are the factors that make life in Nigeria or India different from life in London, New York, and Paris, and because they treat the lives of their characters not as isolated individuals going on actual or spiritual journeys and finding their own individual resolutions, but as individuals moulded, confronted and interfered with by their social environment at every step in their

lives. (14)

Mukherjee here draws a distinction between the narrow "forms of western literature in which the individual has long held the centre of the stage" and the works from the new commonwealth "in which community life and larger socio-political issues are of central importance" (14).

I am not interested in quibbling with Mukherjee's conclusions or even in exposing her own generalizations but merely in observing that she does raise important questions about the universal as an aesthetic criterion, questions which I would like to bring to bear on Layton's work: specifically, how his poetry problematizes the concept of the universal.

Layton has, throughout much of his career, pursued an ongoing, if one-sided, feud in his public statements, forewords and poetry, with Northrop Frye. For his part, Frye has taken the attitude to Layton of an indulgent parent toward a naughty child, writing in his review of Cerberus:

Mr. Layton's work includes a number of epigrammatic squibs on other writers, the best of them, I blushinglly report, being aimed at me. (The Poet and His Critics 34)

Chief among Layton's complaints have been that Frye does not acknowledge the superiority of the poet to the critic, and that Frye's academic approach truncates poetry from

experience. These beliefs on Layton's part have resulted in a series of diatribes against Frye. Referring to Frye in "Forever Honeyless: Canadian Criticism," Layton writes:

His repeated contention is that poetry is made from poetry and therefore has no direct relation to life or reality. "Literature as a whole is independent from real experience." Poppycock, of course, as any practising poet would tell him if he had a mind to listen. (58)

Thus, in his preface to The Laughing Rooster, Layton feels justified in writing of "Dr. Northrop Frye's necrophilia disguised as an interest in the anatomy of Criticism" (109). Even when Layton rails against critics in general without alluding to Frye by name, as he does in his foreword to The Swinging Flesh, one gets the sense that it is the image of Frye which is uppermost in Layton's mind:

Each generation of prissy Anglo-Saxon academics in this country makes the same mistake, for the even tenor of their lives prevents them from understanding the tempestuous world in which the poet must have his being. Their serenities and Olympian languors- their archetypal lullabies- are not for him. (90)

Despite Layton's prodigious efforts to distinguish

himself from the archetypal critic in terms of understanding poetry, however, he occasionally employs in his prose the same vocabulary of the universal which Mukherjee associates with Frye. Here Layton affirms his faith in a universal human condition by emphasizing that the poetry that endures is the poetry that transcends any particular historical situation. In his foreword to The Tightrope Dancer, Layton writes:

When women, homosexuals, proles, and blacks are at last free and equal, people will still continue to experience grief and rapture, want sex, grow old, and die. Enduring poetry keeps these constants in mind, whatever the earth-shaking changes in foreign policy and government.

(TD 11)

Furthermore, in the concluding paragraph to his foreword to The Shattered Plinths, Layton places the poet in a world which is highly reminiscent of Frye's world of "uniform patterns of technology." Layton writes of the new universal mythology from which poets supposedly draw their language:

Increasingly I have come to think that the leading political figures of today have replaced the gods of the past, that the words and deeds of the larger-than-life de Gaulles and Titos exercise the same sort of fascination on the minds of bored overcrowded urbanites as in

earlier ages was exercised by the arbitrary gods. Their parthenon is the daily newspaper which, frankly, I find more exciting to think about than Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or Homer's *Iliad*. A new mythology has been created which, replacing the older ones of classical Greece and Rome or of Christianity, provides the poet with those universal emblems he needs if he is to speak to men separated by walls of nationality and culture. The new myths inspire a common language, if not a common way of looking at things, and no poet who desires to be truly of his own time can afford any longer to ignore or neglect them. (SP 16)

In this passage, the claims to universality "deconstruct themselves." Gradually, as one reads down the entire paragraph, the encompassing universe is reduced to a very small and select space, one that Mukherjee would have no trouble identifying as a Western world masquerading as a universal one. The first clue to this enclosure movement is the mention of "bored overcrowded urbanites": presumably any non-city dwellers are exempted from the new lingua franca. Next, this imaginary universal human being naturally reads the newspaper. It is taken for granted that he is literate, and of course no distinction is made between reading The New York Times or Pravda. Also, with the mention of Ovid and Homer, the reader is being subtly informed that this "universal"

tradition is firmly anchored in the west. There is no Ramayana or Arabian Nights here. Lastly, and this goes almost without saying, Layton is speaking to a universe of men.

Even in this passage where Layton appears to espouse a belief in the universal, then, he acknowledges the responsibility of the poet to "be of his time," an indicator that the "universal" is in fact rooted in time and place. Layton has emphasized this location in time and place elsewhere. The titles of his first two volumes of poetry, Here And Now and Now is the Place, reveal a concern with the specificity of time and place. And in his preface to The Laughing Rooster, in the midst of an attack on the generic critic, Layton alludes to both the subjective gaze of the poet and the relativity of human experience:

I do not deny to the critic or theorist of literature sensitivity and concern, yet it cannot be said too often that their activities are parasitic on those of the poet dedicated to exploring his own existential being for the meanings of human experience at a given time and place.

(117)

Layton asserts that truth is not an abstract universal category but one grounded in the individual subjective consciousness. Referring to his poem "A Tall Man Executes A Jig," Layton writes: "More than any other poem of mine, this

one fuses feeling and thought in an intense moment of perception. Of truth. Truth for me, of course" (Engagements 45). Elsewhere, in his foreword to The Laughing Rooster, Layton writes of the poet's mandate in a way which suggests the hegemony of the subjective:

In this business of writing, a man can only speak of what he knows, of what he has himself been brought face to face with. What else is poetry but a self-authenticated speaking, a reaching down into the roots of one's being. (109)

Furthermore, despite Layton's affirmation that enduring poetry keeps the constants of the human condition in mind, he recognizes the particularity of his own age, in terms of historical events and in terms of our perception of those events. Indeed, in his foreword to The Shattered Plinths, he dismisses the ability of "enduring poetry" to speak to us in the twentieth century:

I submit that a new element was ushered into the human situation with World War II, with the slave camps of Communist Russia and the extermination camps of Nazi Germany. With the terroristic bombings of Hamburg and Cologne. Hiroshima. Consider these: genocide, the systematic use of terror to cow entire regions into

submission or surrender, mass exterminations carried out with all the refinements a fiendish imagination could devise, the atrocities done to helpless victims for no other purpose but the gratification of sadistic impulse. The almost complete apathy human suffering and misfortune nowadays encounter. Worse: today the sight of an individual writhing in pain provokes laughter rather than sympathy and commiseration; and wretchedness is more likely to call out derision in the onlooker than concern. It is this new and terrifying fact that utterly invalidates ninety-nine per cent of the world's literature of the past.... (13)

Layton's poetry dismantles the concept of the universal primarily through what Frederick Goldsworthy has termed Layton's "rampant I." The preponderance of the first person singular in Layton's poems, coupled with references to his faculty of sight, raises questions about any claim to universality. By stressing his particular "I" and "eye," Layton draws attention to his own highly idiosyncratic situation and perspective. The "I" points toward an individuality that problematizes any attempt to generalize from the particular. Thus the Laytonian paradox is that while he sees the poet as one who lives the world of *men*, Layton's poet is a supreme being whose experience of the world is unlike that of other men.

Goldsworthy notes the sense of superiority which appears to manifest itself in much of Layton's poetry. Arguing that Layton "seems never to want to be what most people think of as a teacher: a wise man talking to others" (139), Goldsworthy identifies Layton's position as follows:

He is much more concerned to be a wrathful Old Testament prophet, and sometimes even a Greek god who at times can be gentle, but who is more concerned to demonstrate and reinforce his difference from, and power (through superior knowledge) over, his would-be supplicants and followers than he is to draw them to him or into the light. (139-40)

Layton's superior poetic "I" is central, transcendent and comprehensive. He is the focal point of nature, as in "The Cold Green Element":

At the end of the garden walk
the wind and its satellite wait for me.... (CPIL 170)

"Whatever Else Poetry is Freedom" suggests the "immortality" of the poetic "I," his figurative conquest of the universal experience of death through his poetry:

So whatever else poetry is freedom. Let

Far off the impatient cadences reveal
A padding for my breathless stilts. Swivel
O hero, in the fleshy groves, skin and glycerine,
And sing of lust, the sun's accompanying shadow
Like a vampire's wing, the stillness in dead feet-
Your stave brings resurrection, O aggrieved king.
(CPIL 317)

The inclusive and far-reaching realm of the poetic "I" is implied in the opening lines of "The Birth of Tragedy":

And me happiest when I compose poems.
Love, power, the huzza of battle
are something, are much;
yet a poem includes them like a pool
water and reflection. (CPIL 121)

For Layton, poetry includes the worldly things, "Love, power, the huzza of battle," in an imaginative sense. It is the poet's imagination which ensures that his experience will be largely irreconcilable with that of other men. Although the faculty of the imagination suggests the potential unity of the poet with the rest of humanity, it ultimately separates the two. While his imagination permits the poet to empathize with humanity in general, this ability to identify also sets him apart so that his conclusions are not applicable to every

man.

Although some of Layton's poems express a longing for a universal condition in which time, place, viewpoint and consciousness collapse, such a state is in one way or another revealed to be an impossibility. Only through his imagination is the poet able to create an imaginary sphere in which to remove temporarily the barriers of time and space, but imagination itself is portrayed as a barrier alienating the poetic "I" from other men. In "Seven O'Clock Lecture," Layton laments the inability of the artistic imagination to penetrate the mind of what is its antithesis for Layton, the comfortable bourgeois:

Gregor Metamorphosis, fantastic bogeylouse,
you are without meaning to those who nightly
bed down on well-aired sheets.... (CPIL 111)

Because Layton is aware of this inherent gap between the poet and his reader, he devotes a lot of energy in his poems to directing both his own and his reader's gaze in the same direction. When, however, Layton attempts to equate his vision with that of his reader, the artificiality of his vision is emphasized. By drawing attention to their artifice and framing devices, the poems subtly undercut the objectivity of the "I/eye's" gaze and remind us that the poems are constructions representing only one possible view among many.

This process leads to the realization that when the poet presents objective details or even facts, there is the subjective decision of inclusion and arrangement. The poet cannot describe all that he sees. The line from the poem "Golfers," "They come into the picture suddenly," alludes to a situation in which the poet is giving us his limited, not godlike or omniscient, view.

The longing for the impossible dream of the universal finds its clearest expression in a trio of poems, "In The Midst Of My Fever," "The Birth of Tragedy" and "The Fertile Muck." The three begin as visions of a state in which the restrictions of time, place and individuality collapse but all three poems ultimately undermine the possibility of such harmony. "In The Midst of My Fever" works through a succession of images evoking a kaleidoscopic, seemingly drug-induced state:

In the midst of my fever, large
as Europe's pain,
The birds hopping on the blackened wires
were instantly electrocuted;
Bullfrogs were slaughtered in large numbers
to the sound of their own innocent thrummings;
The beautiful whores of the king
found lovers and disappeared;
The metaphysician sniffed the thought before him

like a wrinkled fruit.... (CPIL 98)

As Eric Reif notes in his M.A. thesis Irving Layton: The Role of the Poet, "In The Midst Of My Fever" depicts a druglike state in which the "I" triumphs over the boundaries of time and space (62). There are numerous hints throughout the poem, however, that serve to undermine that vision of universality. Although the sense of timelessness and placelessness would appear to be affirmed in the following stanza where the past is superimposed on the present, the reference to "Time's double exposure" puts it all in doubt:

Great Caesar's legions halted before my troubled ear,
 Jacobean in Time's double exposure.
My brassy limbs stiffened
 like a trumpet blast; surely
The minutes now covered with gold-dust
 will in time
Drop birdlime upon the handsomest
 standard-bearer,
Caesar himself discover the exhaustible flesh,
 my lips
White with prophecy aver before him.

The reference to photography in the image of Caesar's legions stopping before the "I's" ear, "Jacobean in Time's

double exposure," functions as an indication of the artifice involved in the creation of poetry and its expression of this universal state: it is as inaccurate a depiction of reality as an over-exposed photograph.

The last stanza dissects the universal "I," revealing it to be an uneasy conglomeration of conflicting identities:

In the depth of my gay fever, I saw my limbs
like Hebrew letters
Twisted with too much learning. I was
Seer, sensualist, or fake ambassador; the tyrant
who never lied
And cried like an infant after he'd had to
to succour his people.
Then I disengaging my arm to bless,
In an eyeblink became the benediction
dropped from the Roman's fingers;
Nudes, nodes, nodules, became all one,
existence seamless and I
Crawling solitary upon the globe of marble
waited for the footfall which never came.
And I thought of Time's wretches and of some
dear ones not yet dead
And of Coleridge taking laudanum.

The universal "I" is not depicted as organic but rather as a

surreal composite of "Seer, sensualist...fake ambassador...tyrant...."

The impossibility of universality is suggested by the allusion to dreaming. The feat of transcending time and place is associated with the action of blinking: "Then I disengaging my arm to bless/ in an eyeblink became the benediction...." Blinking is similar to REM or rapid eye movement, occurring during the period of sleep in which the greatest quantity of dreams occur. Taking the allusion further, it also suggests the state of dreaming in which time does not operate, in the sense that while a dream's interior time might take hours or days, the dream itself is actually being dreamt in seconds or less.

The alliterative phrase "nudes, nodes, nodules" functions as a last-ditch attempt to achieve the universal by conflating the whole with the part, ("nudes" with "nodes," respectively) and conflating several fields of knowledge. "Nodes" has several specific meanings in the different branches of mathematics and science, some of which imply joining or intersection. In general vocabulary it is simply a knot or a protuberance but in botany it is the joint or the part of the stem which normally bears a leaf. In geometry it is a point on a curve where there can be more than one tangent line or plane and in physics it is a point in a standing wave in which there is hardly any vibration or none at all. Lastly, in astronomy, a nodule is either of two points at which the orbit

of a heavenly body intersects a given plane (Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary, 970). The dream of the universal, in which reality is the same in Rome and the twentieth century, not to mention Nigeria and New York, is succinctly expressed in the phrase "existence seamless."

The presence of the five "I's" in the last stanza serves to reinforce the impression that universality is a subjective category, and hence, a contradiction in terms. The lines "and I/ crawling solitary upon the globe of marble" reveal the solipsistic nature of the "I" who is alone on an artificial world in a universe of his own making. The "I" is wrenched back into time which he never really left, thinking of "Time's wretches," and the illusion of the "I" becoming one with existence is finally completely undermined in the last line, where it is identified with the unrealizable dream through the allusion to Coleridge taking drugs.

The poem "The Birth of Tragedy" expresses the dream of the universal as the prerogative of poetry in which varying modes of experience are merged. The poem is seen as a vehicle uniting disparate experience. As such, the title is particularly apt. As Eli Mandel notes in his book The Poetry of Irving Layton, the title for the poem is taken from Nietzsche's book on the origin of art in which he relates how Dionysius "dreamed the mad dream of perfection and so was slain and became Apollo" (19). The first stanza opens with the poetic dream set forth:

And me happiest when I compose poems.

Love, power, the huzza of battle
are something, are much;

yet a poem includes them like a pool
water and reflection. (CPIL 121)

In the first three lines, poetry is presented not only as a perfect unity of appearance and reality, but also as a unifier of disparate aspects of experience: love and power.

The fourth and fifth lines, however, conjure up the antithesis of this static dream with their reference to water: it was Heraclitus who, in referring to the mutability of life, chose water to illustrate his point, namely that one cannot step into the same river twice. The poet's use of "me" and "I" in the first line and in these following lines again suggests the subjective nature of this dream:

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.

At this point in the poem, Layton's poetic "I," as the articulator of a universal truth, is the instrument that

unites life's dichotomies. The "I" speaks for all of nature, man included, and this implies what might be termed the "universal fallacy": the assumption that because life is the same everywhere the poet can safely articulate experience for everybody and everything.

The last stanza of "The Birth of Tragedy" turns the idea of a timeless and placeless universality on its head and unobtrusively calls into question the objectivity and reliability of the "I":

A quiet madman, never far from tears,
I lie like a slain thing
under the green air the trees
inhabit, or rest upon a chair
towards which the inflammable air
tumbles on many robins' wings;
noting how seasonably
leaf and blossom uncurl
and living things arrange their death,
while someone from afar off
blows birthday candles for the world.

The second line, in addition to depicting the "I" in a supine position, seems also to evoke the other sense of the verb "to lie," that is the act of not telling the truth, and this puts into doubt the reliability of the vision. The "I" himself,

despite his boasted ability to serve as core for "nature's divided things," is able to detach himself sufficiently here to "note" in the passing of the seasons the mutability of existence. More significantly, the "I" is aware of someone else in a different faraway place who celebrates or at least marks the passing of time. Thus the "I" acknowledges the temporal and the spatial, in direct opposition to the timeless and placeless, or the universal.

The longing for the impossible dream of the universal is also explored and ultimately rejected in the poem "The Fertile Muck." Again the "I" in the poem affirms his superiority over nature. The difference is that whereas in "The Birth of Tragedy" the "I" serves as core, as unifier, of the disparate elements of reality, the "I" in this poem actually gives meaning to reality:

There are brightest apples on those trees
but until I, fabulist, have spoken
they do not know their significance.... (CPIL 28)

The "I" continues in the second stanza to assert his superiority over all creatures of the earth and, consequently, his superiority of vision:

Nor are the winged insects better off
though they wear my crafty eyes

wherever they alight.

The "I" here distances himself from nature and the rest of humanity. He is an explosive force of energy and imagination but humanity, identified with the "winged insects" through the metaphor of "flies," turns from him in fear:

And if in August joiners and bricklayers
are thick as flies around us
building expensive bungalows for those
who do not need them, unless they release
me roaring from their moth-proofed cupboards
their buyers will have no joy, no ease.

I could extend their rooms for them without cost
and give them crazy sundials
to tell the time with, but I have noticed
how my irregular footprint horrifies them
evenings and Sunday afternoons:
they spray for hours to erase its shadow.

The poetic "I" offers the transforming gift of the imagination but the rest of humanity does not even see the "I." They merely see his trace, his footprint and its shadow which they attempt to obliterate.

The final stanza proposes a way of defeating the

boundaries of time and space which ultimately proves illusory:

How to dominate reality? Love is one way;
imagination another. Sit here
beside me, sweet; take my hard hand in yours.
We'll mark the butterflies disappearing over the hedge
with tiny wristwatches on their wings:
our fingers touching the earth, like two Buddhas.

Love and imagination are offered as ways of escaping the restrictions of reality, specifically the limitations of time and space, presumably because, to borrow a cliché, love conquers all, because it "alters not," if we are to believe the Bard, and lastly because it bridges the division between two separate beings. As for imagination, its capabilities are self-announcing.

So far so good; however, the last three lines undermine the conviction that love and the imagination are able to transcend time and place. The two figures, the "I" and his "sweet" sit together, holding hands "like two Buddhas." The reference to Buddhism in this last line is important in understanding the dream of universalism because it alludes to a conception of life which has as its main goal the transcendence of place and time: Nirvana. Indeed, the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism are posited on the assumption of a universal truth. The first truth is that sorrow is the

universal experience of humankind. Second, this sorrow is the result of desire, and the rebirth cycle is perpetuated by the desire for existence. Third, the removal of sorrow can only come from the removal of desire and fourth, desire can only be left behind by adherence to the Eightfold Path, a code of ethical conduct beginning with the right way of seeing things and including the right thinking, the right speech and the right action. With the ending of desire, Buddhism holds that the individual passes from the world of individual existence into the world of Pure Being, known as Nirvana (Webster's Dictionary 126).

The buddha reference serves merely to accentuate the unbuddhist qualities of the poem, such as the celebration of the individual "I" with his ability to create meaning and his supposed superiority to the rest of nature as well as the emphasis on desire as manifested in love. The ostensible promise of timelessness through love and the imagination is also rendered problematic by the "I's" determination to watch the concrete manifestation of mortality depicted in the image of the butterflies, some varieties of which live only for a day. In case the reader should miss the point, the butterflies wear "tiny wristwatches on their wings." Finally, the reality of space and its restricting effect on vision is contained in the idea that life disappears in time and space as the butterflies disappear "over the hedge" beyond the "I's" human, individual and hence limited vision.

Layton's belief that the imagination distinguishes the poet from the rest of humanity, the "bungalow dwellers," in "The Fertile Muck" is a crucial aspect of his world view. Indeed, the reader is constantly bombarded in Layton's poems and forewords with the knowledge that the poet is different from other men. In his essay "The Rampant 'I': Irving Layton Re-Assessed," Frederick Goldsworthy identifies the various aspects of Layton's work which buttress his sense of alienation. Goldsworthy points to Layton's espousal of Jewishness:

In the figure of the Jew, rejected, homeless, sinned against, misunderstood, threatened and battered but uncowed, he seems to see an image of himself not only as Jew but, more importantly, as poet, rejected, misunderstood and sinned against but defiant. (139)

In the figure of the Jew, as Goldsworthy recognizes, Layton finds the most comfort in seeing himself as an Old Testament prophet. Yet even as he is affirming his connection to the prophetic tradition, Layton must differentiate himself. "Vexata Quaestio," an account of being (self-) chosen, stresses the poetic "I/eye's" difference from humanity in general and the prophet as well.

The poem's opening lines establish the primacy of sight. From there, the other senses of sound and touch proceed:

I fixing my eyes upon a tree
Maccabean among the dwarfed
 Stalks of summer
Listened for ship's sound and birdsong
And felt the bites of insects
 Expiring in my arms' hairs. (CPIL 84)

The following stanzas distinguish the "I" from the rest of humanity and set him among the visionary or the mad who claim confirmation of their election:

And there among the green prayerful birds
Among the corn I heard
 The chaffering blades:
"You are no flydung on cherry blossoms,
Among two-legged lice
 You have the gift of praise.

Give your stripped body to the sun
Your sex to any skilled
 And pretty damsel;
From the bonfire
Of your guilts make
 A blazing Greek sun."

This scene, while evocative of the biblical account of Moses and the burning bush, differs from its archetype in several ways. Although the speaker here, like Moses, is being chosen, he is being chosen for a fundamentally different task and, correspondingly, the pagan presence of the sun replaces the Hebraic deity. The "I" is being chosen not to serve God and to save his people but to serve his own desires and to save himself. Whereas Moses' election took him out of his isolated life as a shepherd and brought him back into society to serve his people, the election here further alienates the "I" by stressing his difference from and superiority to the rest of humanity. Thus, Layton even feels the need to distinguish his prophetic stance from that of his role-models.

What is significant here is that the "I" is different: he is no "flydung"; he has "the gift of praise." That is, he is a poet. But, even more importantly for the poet, his difference from the rest of humanity is almost indecipherable from his ability to see his difference. Thus, the poetic "I/eye's" difference from the rest of humanity is based on vision and imagination: simply put, he sees things which his fellow human beings are unable to see. This conception of the poet's superior vision and its implication in his alienation from humanity finds its expression in the technological metaphor of "The Improved Binoculars." The poet is an alienated being who looks down on the suffering of humanity from his isolated height:

Below me the city was in flames:
the firemen were the first to save
themselves. I saw steeples fall on their knees.
(CPIL 139)

The poetic "I" here is isolated in space, in his power of vision, and in experience. Because of his spatial isolation, he does not share in the human experience of suffering. He observes.

"Iroquois in Nice" is another poem in which the "I" sees something which the rest of humanity does not, and again it is an act of violence. The poem presents the image of an Indian chief, arrayed in his native dress, wampum belt and beaverskin on the Nice quay. The native is the figure of the poet, anomalous, anachronistic. He does not fit in:

An Indian chief steps out on the quay
and offers me the smell of balsam and fir.... (SP 36)

The native, like the poet, feels the need to make himself familiar to his audience:

"Ugh, Ugh" the Indian chief says
with the utmost guttural expressiveness
so as not to disappoint the American and me
(but he may have merely been clearing his throat)....

Despite Layton's claim in the foreword to, The Shattered Plinths that poetry can transcend culture and national boundaries he is making a radically different statement here:

Though his face is bronzed and painted up
it is not unfriendly; just the same the tourists
-German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, blond Swedes-
have no yen to meet him. Only an American
stays behind, sharing with me an affection
ancestral as our gloomy forests and lakes
for this misplaced Iroquois chief....

Because of their lack of common history, the Europeans cannot sympathize with the Iroquois' plight. Only the American who shares the Canadian experience of oppressing native peoples has any interest in him. Culture is not easily translatable or communicable. Layton then proceeds to develop the figure of the native as poet, as maker of metaphor:

"This sea smells too much of Espresso coffee,
also of love-making and imported whisky;
and look- there, there, farther off- no one swims
in it: those are not arms, they are baguettes!"
They really are the arms of a lone swimmer
who's ventured some distance from the beach
and the French provincials browning their pots

but I get his point.

Here the chief fulfils the typical role of the poet for Layton- he directs the gaze of his audience to the far sights and then he alters them through metaphor.

The last stanza comments upon the insubstantial nature of the poet and vision, and further separates the speaker and the American, who become poet figures like the native, or at least informed readers, from the Europeans:

He moves toward the curb where sighting a Peugeot
he throws himself directly under its wheels;
nobody else sees the encounter of Indian
and car except the two of us
who tense for the explosion of beads and fur
that must fall on everyone's head like confetti;
but there's no explosion, no sound of brakes....

In a less fantastic way, the poem "Early Morning in Cote St. Luc" with its diurnal title locating the poet in the midst of suburbia retains the sense of the poet's difference from humanity based on what and how he sees. The first line begins by telling us what the "I" sees:

So I awake and see the white
table under the willow tree,

a fragment of edge, a smile
of paint. (CPIL 108)

This is a poetic rendering of ordinariness, a metaphoric account of what would appear as just a table to anybody without the "poetic eye." The "I" also sees a "grey steam shovel" which becomes in his eyes "an immense praying mantis, / poised / for thrust." Further down some of Layton's pet divisions manifest themselves in the account of others who lack the poet's imagination: the housewife, the worker, and the academic:

In the neighbourhood
a professor
glances at his collection
of tomes, slowly yellowing
into favour.

The verb "to glance" is a weaker version of the verb "to see" in the sense that it is brief and fleeting, and, whereas the poet looks at life and transfigures it through language, the professor merely "glances" at his "tomes," which are in sound evocative of "tombs," in a sterile act. The plumber installs a toilet bowl, the housewife "cooks her lavish poisons / for the household," and, in the last stanza, the poet sets himself apart, largely on the basis of vision and imagination:

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

Here, Layton distinguishes between those who are complacent and lacking in vision and those, like himself, who possess the uncomfortable power of sight.

Sometimes Layton effectively alienates himself from humanity in general; at other times, concerned that if he alienates himself too much, his vision will become inaccessible, he intuitively attempts to bridge the differences between his vision and that of his reader. What ensues is not really so much a concurrence of world views as it is the surreptitious superimposing of the poet's way of seeing on that of the reader, masked as a sort of inherent shared point of view. Goldsworthy discusses the particular manner in which Layton's sense of alienation becomes in his poetry a self-fulfilling prophecy:

Much of his work seems deliberately aimed at distancing himself from most of the rest of humanity... His misanthropic poems, like "Golfers" or "Family Portrait," seem to have no other aim than to set the poet off from the rest of humanity; there is nothing for the golfers or

the family to learn from his vindictive depiction. (139)

Despite Goldsworthy's claim that "Golfers" and "Family Portrait" are indicative of efforts to distinguish the poet from the rest of humanity, these two poems are noteworthy for the way in which Layton unobtrusively blurs the difference between himself and the reader. In addition, the poems draw attention to this process by emphasizing the artifice and artificiality of the poet's gaze. "Golfers" begins with a condemnation of the golfers' complacency, a highly negative attribute in Layton's lexicon:

Like Sieur Montaigne's distinction
between virtue and innocence
what gets you is their unbewilderment.... (CPIL 19)

The first clue to the process of getting the reader on the "I's" side, or, perhaps more accurately, of making it appear as if the "I" and the reader were already on the same side before the poem even begins, is the use of the second person singular, "what gets *you* is their unbewilderment," rather than the less assuming and more exclusive first person singular, "what gets *me*...", for example. The poetic "I" is presuming to inform the reader how he or she is reacting to the scene.

The opening line of the following stanza, with its

vocabulary of painting and depiction (discourse from the visual arts), hints at the deliberate artistry of the poet, as artist or photographer manipulating the limits of the scene:

They come into the picture suddenly
like unfinished houses, gapes and planed wood,
dominating a landscape....

The word "landscape," while it can refer to a panoramic view also of course denotes a particular genre of painting, the artistic depictions of such views, and the adjective "unfinished" reinforces the idea that the golfers of the poem are man-made constructions. More importantly, they are identified with incomplete constructions, as all poetic creations must be. Once the picture is set, so to speak, the poet can make the universal statement. As if showing his portrait and pointing to it like a lecturing artist, Layton states the obvious:

And you see at a glance
among sportsmen they are the metaphysicians,
intent, untalkative, pursuing Unity

(What finally gets you is their chastity)

And that no theory of pessimism is complete

which altogether ignores them

The casual off-hand phrase "And you see at a glance" conflates what the poet sees and what the reader is intended to see, and we are lulled into thinking that we are seeing for ourselves when we are actually being carefully instructed in what and how to see.

The same process is at work in the more misanthropic "Family Portrait." The very title itself suggests its artifice and subjectivity. Milton Wilson, in his 1973 essay "Notebook on Layton," cites Layton's fondness for artistic metaphor:

...in the fifties many of his poems took their occasion from a painting or a sculpture, and even those that didn't often treated objects and people as elements in a sharply defined visual design. (221)

Wilson proceeds to discuss several of Layton's poems which employ a vocabulary of the visual arts, and he describes Layton's work with such adjectives as "painterly," without noting the significance of the poet's focusing attention on his artifice and the framing function of his portraits. Eli Mandel, in his book The Poetry of Irving Layton, takes the analysis further when he observes how Layton directs the reader towards the realization that the poem being read is an

artificial construction:

We feel the presence of the perceiving poet when the adjective seems to say more about his sensibility than about the object itself, a give-away that he is "inventing." Layton favours words like "delicate," "scrupulous," "ingenious," "exact," "composed," and these connect with the feeling that he is describing the poem or the way the poem organizes its material. Frequently, he directs us to compositional features or perceptive processes with words like "observe," "note," "see," "look," "watch": "The look on your face appalled at being there/ has taught me severity, exactness of speech" or "And I, a singer in season, observe/ Death is a name for beauty not in use." (74-5)

The first stanza of the poem "Family Portrait" immediately sets the scene in what Goldsworthy terms a "vindictive" tone:

That owner of duplexes
has enough gold to sink himself
on a battleship. His children,
two sons and a daughter, are variations
on the original gleam: that is,
slobs with a college education. (CPIL 356)

In the third stanza, we see again the throwaway line, "And you can tell," identical in function to the "And you see at a glance" in "Golfers" through which Layton involves the reader in a conspiracy of superiority. Both phrases begin with "and" as if logically following from what has previously transpired in the poem:

With the assurance of money
in the bank
they spit out the black, cool elliptical
melonseeds, and you can tell
the old man has rocks
but no culture: he spits,
gives the noise away free.

The last stanza drives home the effect of subjectivity with its three "I's":

They're about as useless
as tits on a bull,
and I think:
"Thank heaven I'm not
Jesus Christ-
I don't have to love them."

In his early poem "The Yard," Layton again draws

attention to the artifice and its corollary, the limits, of the "I's" gaze. He depicts his isolated viewing point:

No one prospers outside my door:

I sit like the first criminal with an old woman,

Her hair timesoaped her hands folded

Like a hymnal. Here everyone is dying out a pain.

I spy from my restricted gallery, a turret. (CPIL 141)

Here, in this fifth line, Layton seems to be playing a version of the children's game "I Spy" in which a child says "I spy something that is green" (or blue or red, as the case may be) and then the other children have to guess what the first child is looking at. This line prepares us for the poem that is to come by qualifying the scope of the vision through the use of the term "restricted gallery." A gallery, in addition to being a name for a balcony or porch, contains the connotations of "art gallery" in which art objects are viewed. Gallery is also a theatrical term which refers to the small raised platform beyond the acting area on which stagehands stand while working. Thus it reinforces the sense of some behind the scenes manipulations by the poet. The use of the term "restricted" serves to set some doubt in the reader's mind regarding the ability of the poet to see the entirety of the scene. It also draws attention to the fact that the poet plays a restricting role, in the sense of deciding what to

describe and how to describe it. The yard itself acts as a limiting device, restricting space and view.

What the poet sees is a series of images in which the everyday becomes exotic, contributing to an almost cliched view of the poet enhancing the diurnal through metaphor and simile:

Outside my door everything is prepared:

From wooden scarps the clotheslines arch like scimitars

The windingsheets swell under a bolshevik moon....

The metaphors and similes also serve as a means of conflating time and space, uniting the "here and now," as it were, with the imagined Russia of the Bolsheviks and the scimitar-laden Orient. The mention of the door, in the first lines of the first three stanzas, also focuses attention on the limiting function of the poet: the door frame acts in much the same way as a picture frame, so that the viewer sees only what the artist wishes him or her to see and not beyond.

The conclusion of the poem attempts to resolve the distance between the poet and viewer which has been unfolding in the poem:

A column of whispers rises from the summermoist yard:

I think it is the neanderthal

Tree of Eden lifting its immense branches

Over my banisters for manslayer and saint;
And I am neither I am neuter I am you.

The last line with its absence of internal punctuation mimicking its desire for unity reads as if the "I," worried that he has made the gulf between himself and the rest of humanity too large, suddenly realizes the necessity of bridging the gap before the poem ends, to affirm the connection between poet and reader.

"Summer Idyll" also emphasizes the artifice of the poem, and, in addition, suggests the unreliability of the "I/eye." The poem begins with the "I" at rest in his home and, typically, the "I" is "seeing":

At home, lying on my back,
Lying with perfect stillness I saw
The scene dispose itself differently
Like a backdrop held by an enormous claw:
On either side the even expensive
Sod; the bungalow with the red border
Of roses; the woman past her middle years
In gabardine shorts, and her hard fists
That held in place over her suntanned knee
A book, half-shut, in spectacular covers. (CPIL 142)

The repetition of the word "lying" in lines one and two

suggests the idea of the poet who is not only lying down but also telling a lie. The second line, "Lying with perfect stillness," also evokes the image of a person lying with a straight face. This subversion of truth continues. The word "scene" connotes the world of theatre and artifice in which the stagehand has made something appear. And the reference to the scene disposing itself differently implies there are many other ways it could appear.

The "I" is in a privileged position here, in the sense that he seems to be able to recognize the scene for what it is, make believe. The concluding stanza, however, puts even that assurance in doubt. The "I" questions his own sight and leads the reader to ask whether he has contrived the scene or whether he truly saw it, thus jeopardizing the reliability of the poet's gaze as well as its objectivity. It introduces the problem of whether the "I" is creator of the drama or has become a character inside it. It also reinforces the sense that the reader's gaze is being shaped in the same way as that of a theatre-goer:

Did I contrive this, or did I inerrantly see
The line of hair on her lip?
Surmise her frown? Her talipes?
Did the enchanted hour suddenly darken?
And did the roses
Really uncurl and stretch upon their stems

And order their ignorant centres
Toward the chill anonymous tune,
then abruptly with the afternoon
Erupt into thick ash against the window frames?

The final line, ending as it does with an unanswered question, presents the image of an ash-covered window frame which points towards the imperfect gaze of the poet and his own framed and limited view.

As a consequence of Layton's subversion of the poetic "I's" gaze, showing it to be subjective, unreal, limited, and artificial, the reader is forced to reevaluate the poems themselves as well as his or her own subjective gaze. Layton's poetry contrasts the impossible dream of a universal state, in which differences of time, space, experience, consciousness and viewpoint collapse, with the image of the poetic "I" ultimately alienated by his imagination and idiosyncratic way of seeing. This trope of the isolated poet enables Layton to present his readers with a new way of looking at him. For in spite of his apparent willingness to sound, in Goldsworthy's words, like a "wrathful Old Testament prophet" or even "a Greek god," Layton's metavision highlights a very human sense of self-doubt. In questioning the accuracy of his poetic persona's eye, he challenges his readers to reassess the assumptions created by his public persona. Brash and self-assured as he is, Layton nevertheless shows his

readers what Mukherjee herself has always believed, that there is no absolute truth.

CHAPTER II

THE MASCULINE "I/EYE": OBJECTIFYING WOMEN

The traditional view of Layton holds that he was at the forefront of a revolution in Canadian poetry: his use of four-letter words and his championing of sexuality have been seen as great blows struck against the repressive conventions of Canadian verse and society, a victory against puritanism, gentility and reticence. In a review of Collected Poems (1965), Al Purdy assesses Layton's seminal influence on the use of sexually explicit language in Canadian literature:

He broke the sound barrier of taboo and prudery thru his use of words relating to the sexual act, at a time when many young poets now using his methods and perhaps believing themselves excessively daring were yet unborn.
(147)

This view is so widespread and engrained in our consciousness that it is taken for granted. Even Margaret Atwood, at one of whose poetry readings Layton yelled, "Women are only good for screwing, men are good for screwing plus!" (Cameron 404), gives him credit for his liberating effect on Canadian poetry in her introduction to The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English:

In the mid-fifties Irving Layton published his first truly important books, and very quickly established the basis for a body of work, which, in exuberance of spirit, vigour of imagery, a sexuality unprecedented in Canadian poetry, and a quality Hazlitt would have called *gusto*, has not yet been surpassed. (xxxvi)

Despite the accepted view of Layton, however, underlying his liberal use of four-letter words and unabashed hymns to the pleasures of sex lies a deep conservatism which Northrop Frye alludes to as early as 1952 in his review of The Black Huntsmen: "One can get as tired of buttocks in Mr. Layton as of buttercups in the Canadian Poetry Magazine..." (Engagements 33). While Layton might have substituted "buttocks" for "buttercups," and "cock" and "cunt" for the more genteel descriptive nouns of his poetic forefathers, his is not so much a revolutionary as a very conventional philosophy which seeks to inscribe traditional conceptions of women as powerless sex objects. At times, this reactionary ideology manifests itself within the poem as a denial of history in a sublimating refusal to acknowledge the present reality of the feminist movement.

Thus, rather than being in the vanguard of a progressive movement, Layton is firmly located in a tradition of viewing women which goes back at least hundreds of years, one which John Berger examines in his book on art, Ways of Seeing. The

two aspects which Berger identifies as central to this tradition are the idea of the male gaze and the distinction between the male and the female presence. In discussing the genre of the nude, Berger writes:

In the average European oil painting of the nude, the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. (54)

This of course makes sense, given the fact that the vast majority of the artists were male. Berger also describes the different way in which a man's and a woman's social position has determined their depiction:

A man's presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies... The promised power may be moral, physical, temperamental, economic, social, sexual- but its object is always exterior to the man. A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you... By contrast, a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her... *men act and women appear*. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman

in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (45-7)

Layton has considered himself, and has been labelled by many, as a love poet, or at least as a poet who writes love poems that are as enduring as his "hate" poems. Joanne Lewis notes in her 1988 essay "Irving's Women: A Feminist Critique of the Love Poems of Irving Layton" that "[h]undreds of Layton's poems are written for and about women" (143). Lewis, however, is not content to let the quantity of the work speak for itself. She proceeds to argue that the title "love poetry" is a gross misnomer:

Layton's love poetry, however, is neither a celebration of women nor an enduring tribute to the women who have touched his life; yet to call his poetry sexist, to brand him a male chauvinist and leave it at that, does little but to state the obvious. A close examination of Layton's work, applying some of the theories of feminist criticism, reveals his immature attitude toward women and sex, and his belief that men are superior, both physically and intellectually, to women. It also exposes Layton as a misogynist, with a particular hatred and fear of the woman artist. (143)

Lewis also exposes what some might term the shallowness of Layton's affection for women, its situation in the lower level of the old spirit-body binary:

Why Layton writes about women is simply put in his forward to *Love Poems*: he is turned on by them. While other poets, like Wordsworth, for instance, are inspired by daffodils, Layton treasures "the sight of firm-titted women walking on Avenue Road or St. Catherine St.." (143)

Layton is often recognized as a sensual poet, in the sense that his poetry is full of images grounded in sensory perception: things that can be seen, heard, felt, smelled and tasted, and his appreciation of women could be excused by some as merely a natural consequence of a common theme. Lewis, however, negates this view. According to Lewis, Layton's "praise" of women fits into his struggle against what she terms "the puritan embargo on writing about sexuality in sexually explicit terms," but, as she also notes, it does more than this: "it degrades both women and human sexuality" (144). Lewis discusses Layton's attitude to women, noting his negative images for female genitalia:

The vagina or the vulva (Layton rarely distinguishes between the two) are also referred to as a "dark dank

grove," a "hairy monster," a "passion-moist nest," and, less imaginatively, as a wet snatch, a ditch, a naked twat, a crease, a cockmuff, and a cunt, to name a few of Layton's more popular metaphors. (145)

To put Layton's attitude towards women in the least harmful light, one would have to say that he is primarily concerned with what he can see of women. Graham Pomeroy, in his 1974 essay "Latent Layton: A Male Chauvinist," evokes Frye's wry comment on buttocks and buttercups, concluding that Layton "has recorded more busts and bums than any other meritorious Canadian writer, but he has not lifted pen to elevate the status of women. In fact he has relegated them to the bedroom, haystack, or any other favourable locality for his sexual enjoyment" (3). Arguing that Layton has repeatedly reduced the women in his poems to sex objects, Pomeroy notes the connection between subjugation and objectification:

I will now state the case to show that a great number of Layton's poems are only pointed to subjugate Woman to the tyranny of Man: that women are only frivolous, trivial objects for sexual gratification, and mindless masses of seething flesh waiting for below navel attack in this man's mind. (3)

Despite his ongoing, if one-sided, feud with Frye's

statement that "[l]iterature as a whole is independent from real experience," and his reiteration that poems come out of life, Layton reveals a contradictory belief in his foreword to A Red Carpet for the Sun, in which he writes: "Mercifully all poetry, in the final analysis, is about poetry itself..." (84). Taking this insight further, one could extrapolate from it to read that mercifully all of Layton's love poetry, in the final analysis, is not about women but about the "I/eye" of the poem. What this generalization translates into is that the women Layton writes about are not subjects in the sense of existing for themselves, but rather objects who meet the sexual, psychological and artistic needs of the poetic "I".

I am not primarily concerned with Layton's very crudely male-chauvinist poems about women, but rather with the more subtle poems ostensibly in praise of women, poems which have given rise to the view of Layton as a liberating force. These are in fact poems which ultimately situate women in an inferior position to men, in particular, showing females to be outside the male domains of art and politics. I will restrict myself to occasionally citing some of the less sophisticated examples when they demonstrate how a similar idea appears when it is expressed untrammelled by some of the beguiling effects of diction and metaphor.

Although "For Musia's Grandchildren" is one of Layton's more tender "love" poems, it emphasizes the physical aspects of the woman to the exclusion of everything else, and it also

suggests the role of the male artist in determining the view of the woman. The first stanza begins with the poet presenting his motivation for writing the poem:

I write this poem
for your grandchildren
for they will know of your loveliness
only from hearsay,
from yellowing photographs
spread out on table and sofa
for a laugh. (CPIL 455)

The poetic "I" is writing the poem because the words of non-poetic eyewitnesses, friends and relatives, are not adequate to convey the sense of Musia's beauty. Even the photographs which record a likeness are not deemed as valid a record of truth as the words of the poet. The fact that some words lose their freshness and yellow over time, like photographs, is not acknowledged. The second stanza suggests the power of poetry to freeze time in an image, as well as the desire of the "I" to colonize the viewer with his vision:

When arrogant
with the lovely grace you gave their flesh
they regard your dear frail body pityingly,
your time-dishonoured cheeks

pallid and shrunken
and those hands
that I have kissed a thousand times
mottled by age
and stroking a grey ringlet into place,
I want them suddenly
to see you as I saw you
-beautiful as the first bird at dawn.

The "I" wishes his vision to prevail: he wants the readers of the poem to see the object, Musia, as his eye has seen her. His perception of her and her independent existence are indistinguishable. The third stanza again stresses the woman's physical appearance:

Dearest love, tell them
that I, a crazed poet all his days
who made woman
his ceaseless study and delight,
begged but one boon
in this world of mournful beasts
that are almost human:
to live praising your marvellous eyes
mischief could make glisten
like winter pools at night
or appetite put a fine finish on.

The archaic sounding words "boon" and the concluding simile comparing the woman's eyes to pools evoke the old tropes in which women's eyes were compared to jewels and water. It is interesting that the poet praises the eyes which "appetite put a fine finish on" because it is her eyes which make the subject/object of the poem the potential viewer. Ultimately, however, her subjectivity is reduced to the physical expression of lust, and presumably her appetite is for the poet, so she does not transcend her secondary position. Correspondingly, her eyes are not used to see: they are only manifestations of her affection for the poet. And as for the poetic "I" who hopes her grandchildren will look at her as he has beheld her, the only thing he sees is the physical.

The consequences of a view which prioritizes the physical aspects of women are apparent in Layton's poem for Marilyn Monroe, "Earth Goddess." Layton, in his attempt to find meaning in Monroe's body, responds to her in a purely visual way, not surprisingly, considering his experience with her is limited to having seen her on screen, or perhaps in a calendar or in a magazine. The first stanza locates Monroe in a heavenly sphere supposedly above that of philosophy and mathematics:

I adore you, Marilyn.
You teach sex is no sin
Nor that anguishing fire

To which the saints aspire;
You make absurd for us
All love that's chivalrous:
There is more wisdom
In your shapely bum.
Real pleasure and goodness
Are in your rippling breasts,
Animal health and pride
In your magnificent stride.
Wench, you teach the race to know
Forms forbidden Plato,
A music of the stars
Locked from Pythagoras. (CPIL 194)

Here, Layton engages in typically hyperbolic praise of the female flesh. Some critics might argue that "Earth Goddess" is an eulogy to women, or at least to one woman, perhaps thinking that they themselves would not object to being the subject of such a poem. Desmond Pacey, in a review of The Bull Calf and Other Poems, asserts that Layton is the only Canadian poet he knows who can "really celebrate the sexual act, and certainly the only one capable of writing a poem to Marilyn Monroe ('Earth Goddess') that is neither a sob nor a sneer but a sound, honest tribute" (54-5). The adjectives "wisdom" and "goodness" seem to suggest positive and praiseworthy qualities but the crux of the matter remains that

the woman is being praised not for her character but merely for her physical characteristics. It is her "shapely bum," her "rippling breasts," her "magnificent stride," all visual images in which the poet *chooses* to see wisdom, goodness, magnificence. Logically followed, the argument here implies that the woman is "wise" because she is shapely, "good" because her breasts ripple, and it is understood that she would not be as "wise" or "good" if her body were to deteriorate. Layton accords Monroe superiority over Plato and Pythagoras but it is a dubious honour, one which is crudely undermined in the passage which Lewis cites from Layton's poem "Teufelsdröckh Concerning Women":

"Women will never give the world a Spinoza,
A Wagner or a Marx;
Some lab technicians and second-rate poets, yes,
But never an Einstein or a Goethe.
Vision is strictly a man's prerogative,
So's creativity
Except for a handful of female freaks
With hair on their chins and enlarged glands." (153)

Here the female is denied access to the male domain of art: any female creativity is the result of an abnormal secretion of male hormones. The same concept is expressed in the lines Pomeroy quotes: "'Giving men souls and women holes.../No male

superiority is vaunted here;/ Both are requisite poles'" (5). The title, "Teufelsdröckh," which translates as "Devil's Talk," implies that the Devil's opinions are being presented, but in actuality Layton's views and the Devil's views seem uncannily similar. As my analysis of "Earth Goddess" demonstrates, the X chromosome gave us Plato and Pythagoras while the Y chromosome can offer up no better than Monroe in Layton's universe.

The poem "Look, The Lambs Are All Around Us" can be read as an exuberant critique of the presumably joyless/sexless Canadians who would never have known what to do with sex, let alone know how to enjoy it, if Irving Layton had not been born. It also, however, depicts the woman in a subservient position, existing only as an object to further the pleasure or desires of the male "I". Typically, the poem begins with a reference to the physical attributes of the woman. Layton also manages to kill two of his pet birds with one stone: he raises the physical to the level of mythology and takes a swipe at the hapless academic:

Your figure, love,
curves itself
into a man's memory;
or to put it the way
a junior prof
at Mount Allison might,

Helen with her thick
absconding limbs
about the waist
of Paris
did no better. (CPIL 134)

The division between the poetic male "I" and woman in general is expressed in the way that the figure of the woman is implicitly contrasted with the figure of Homer. It is the woman's *body* which imprints itself on the man's memory whereas Homer, the male responsible for imprinting the physical image of Helen in our memories, is remembered for what he has *written*. That is, he is remembered for what he has *done*, whereas the woman is remembered for how she *appeared*. Homer is remembered, among other things, for how he saw and presented Helen and it is Helen's physical characteristics which led to the Trojan war. A woman's power, both in a political and in an artistic sense, is firmly located in her body. And, as Layton makes clear in "For Musia's Grandchildren," the actual body is mortal. The only way for a woman to transcend her mortality is to have her body immortalized by a male, Homer or Layton if she is lucky, even by the junior prof, so that her memory might live on in the minds of other men. According to Joanne Lewis, Layton's male is both physical and verbal, that is artistic, whereas the woman is just physical:

This power of the word is not one Layton sees as available to women... For a woman writer to show potential, she must overcome the handicap of her womanhood- she must transcend her sex. (150)

The second stanza of "Look, The Lambs Are All Around Us," while admittedly playful, serves to accentuate the division between male and female:

Hell, my back's sunburnt
from so much love-making
in the open air.
The Primate (somebody
made a monkey of him)
and the Sanhedrin
(long on the beard, short
on the brain)
send envoys to say
they don't approve.
You never see them, love.
You toss me in the air
with such abandon,
they take to their heels and run.
I tell you
each kiss of yours
is like a blow on the head!

Here the "I" is making love all day, enjoying the lustiness of his love. Interestingly, it is only he and not she who sees the disapproving prelates' envoys who come to look and then turn and run away. While the "I" is being viewed, he is also the viewer of the woman and the peeping Toms. The woman, however, is only the viewed, an object, and if she does have eyes, they are only for the "I." The poet has a public presence; the woman remains fixed in the private.

The conclusion makes it apparent that this love poem has not ultimately been about sexual repression or about the poet's love for the woman, or even about that woman, but about the fulfilment of the "I's" desires:

What luck, what luck to be loved
by the one girl
in this Presbyterian
country
who knows how to give
a man pleasure.

This demonstrates what a lucky fellow the "I" is, of course implying that it is not really luck at all but merely a question of being highly desirable, to be loved (again love being understood as synonymous with, and not just including, sex) by a "girl" whose main area of knowledge seems to be how to give a man pleasure.

The poem "Women of Rome," masquerading as a paean to the women of a particular city, is really a reactionary hymn to a pre-feminist age. Through its disparagement of history, it both seeks to make the feminist movement disappear and to rob women of their individuality. It also sharpens the distinction between the male, active in the domains of politics and art, and the female, passive in both. The poem opens with characteristic Laytonian exuberance and hyperbole:

The most beautiful women in the world

Go past the Piazza Venezia.

Relics of the Risorgimento are stored there

Gathering the tourists' purchased stare.

They might gather dust for all I care. (CPIL 374)

Both the male "I/eye" and the presumably male tourists ignore history in favour of the more attractive spectacle of the "most beautiful women in the world." The women have been raised/lowered to the status of a tourist sight.

Significantly, it is both viewing males and viewed females who ignore the relics of the Risorgimento, which was the period of struggle for Italian independence and unification between 1750 and 1870. This disregard for history serves the function of wish-fulfilment for the "I." The historical Risorgimento acts as a displaced object for the "I's" desire to ignore the present situation. The historical

struggle was a struggle for political independence and unification in the same way as the present-day feminist movement is a struggle for political and personal independence and reunification: unification in the sense of uniting men and women in equality and uniting the two spheres of body and soul, a unity which had been denied to women for centuries. The "I" wishes to go back to an anti-feminist tradition and, in order to escape the present, he must escape history.

Thus, not only does Layton blissfully show males and females ignoring a historical struggle for self-determination, but he also presents a blurred vision in which all political movements are indistinguishable and equally transitory. What ensues is a kaleidoscopic panning shot of nearly two thousand years, taking in the ruins of Imperial Rome, the Medieval period and Fascist Italy, and juxtaposing them with the closeup of the breathing, vibrant Roman women walking by:

Benito, Benito, where are your bones and thugs?

City of Caesars and Popes,

Rome's imperial statues split and crumble.
Time and the rains that called their bluff
Have stood them there useless and formal.

.....

There was a time when all went suddenly black:
How should you remember it? But that Roman girl

With the voluptuous neck and back
Is real enough in a shifting world.

The "I" wishes to discredit the present day feminist movement, to dismiss it as merely a historical interlude, and his taunting of Mussolini's abbreviated dictatorial reign following so closely on the heels of the Risorgimento which was a struggle for freedom, dismisses all political movements as short-lived and temporary.

The image of the "voluptuous" woman being observed walking by the cold immobile statues of dead men is a powerful conceit which obscures the fact that the men were once alive and had power, had the power "to do to you, or for you" as Berger puts it. Layton presents history crumbling in contrast to the immediate flesh of the women which is presented as constant: "real enough in a shifting world." Layton's strategy to keep women from entering the political world of men is to make them believe that they are superior to it. It is the equivalent of telling Marilyn Monroe that her bum and breasts outdo Plato and Pythagoras. The truth, however, is that women's bodies do not transcend history, unless it is a generic woman rather than an individual person with subjectivity. That is, unless a male artist removes the woman's subjectivity by depicting her and reducing her to an object.

The ensuing lines drive home the idea of the generic

woman and allude to the central difference in the depiction of men and women which Berger identifies: "*men act and women appear.*" Distracted from the "Roman girl/ With the voluptuous neck and back," the "I's" eye quickly alights on another female object passing within his field of vision:

Or that beautiful lady crossing the square

Who once lent her eyes to Raphael, da Vinci....

The fact that the lady crossing the street at that moment is conflated with the one who posed for Raphael or da Vinci hundreds of years ago makes us realize that the "I/eye," and by extension our eye as readers, is not responding to a particular individual woman but to an abstract idea of woman which the male "I/eye" invents.

These lines also distance women from Layton's male domain of art, where the man is active and the woman is passive and the role of vision is central. The function of women is implicitly stated to be the object for the male artists. The women who posed for Raphael and da Vinci have been immortalized along with the artists, but the female model is remembered for her appearance whereas the male artist is recognized for his ability to paint. The male artist's authority is based on what he chose to paint or sculpt, or on what he chose to see, and, more importantly, on how he chose to see it, whereas the female object's reputation depends not

on the basis of what she was but on how she was seen by the male eye. It is not even enough for the woman to exist: she is only raised to a position of value when the male "I/eye" acknowledges her presence.

The woman becomes the object by *lending* her eyes to the male artist. By permitting herself to be painted, the woman relinquishes her own power to see: by letting herself be seen she allows the male to tell her how she should be seen. It becomes more important for her to be seen than to see. Her eyes have ceased to be her own and have instead become the artist's idea of her eyes. The woman transcends history by means of becoming an object in the man's eye whereas the man transcends the limits of time and history through his own vision.

The central role of the male artist in immortalizing the body of a generic woman is implicit in the following romantic image:

Cities and skylarks perish, molluscs on a column:

Her loveliness will never die.

Beside an English poet's grave, fertile

With sunlight, we'd there embrace

Or any other convenient place.

The image of the male poet embracing the interminably lovely woman above the poet's grave, like the image of the fleshy

women walking by crumbling statues, glosses over the fact that the only way the woman's loveliness will not die is if the poet artistically prolongs it. Again, we return to Berger's observation that "*men act and women appear.*" The memory of the dead male poet, like the dead male Caesars and dead male dictators, endures on the basis of his actions, whereas the memory of the woman is predicated solely on her appearance which the male "I" both recognizes, makes his own, and ultimately preserves.

The poem "The Day Aviva Came To Paris," which George Woodcock admires for its "sparkling fluency" and which he terms an "extraordinary erotic fantasia" (167), reveals the modus operandi and the consequences of the male gaze. The woman is placed securely on a pedestal to be observed. Her flesh is praised for transcending history only to mask the desirable (on the part of the male "I/eye") fact that she thus becomes a powerless object of vision.

Despite any claims that the poem is a pure celebration of sexuality, it is essentially a poem about the male "I/eye" undressing *his* woman for all of male Paris and the presumably male reader to see:

The day you came naked to Paris
The tourists returned home without their guidebooks,
The hunger in their cameras finally appeased. (CPIL 378)

The male tourists who have come to sightsee have found a far better sight: the woman undressed by the poet has been reduced from an individual to the status of an object. Here, as in all of Layton's "love poems," the speaker is speaking to men. As the following lines demonstrate, the people admiring Aviva's nakedness are Frenchmen:

Alone once more with their gargoyles, the Frenchmen
Marvelled at the imagination that had produced them

.....

They leaped as one mad colossal Frenchman from their
cafe Pernods

.....

While the Mayor of the 5th Arrondissement
Addressed the milling millions of Frenchmen:

This poem is the literary equivalent of the nude painting, and as Berger comments in his analysis of the Western tradition, the spectator is "presumed to be a man" (54).

Aviva's passive nakedness, contrasted with the active and viewing role of the male, also adds to the status of the male who is exhibiting her

My little one, as if under those painted skies
It was again 1848,
They leaped as one mad colossal Frenchman from their

cafe Pernods

Shouting, "Vive l'Australienne!

Vive Layton who brought her among us!

Let us erect monuments of black porphyry to them!

Let us bury them in the Pantheon!"

While both poet and woman are lauded here together, they are being praised for different and telling reasons. Aviva is typically praised for being naked while the "I" is once more praised for the excellence of his "eye" and the excellence of his actions: namely, choosing her, and then bringing her to Paris for the Frenchmen to see. That is, for depicting her in the poem he has written. The woman exists to add to the poet's status. Berger discusses the way in which the female nude served to further the prestige of the male exhibiting it. Referring to the nude portrait of Charles II's mistress Nell Gwynne, Berger writes:

It shows her passively looking at the spectator staring at her naked. This nakedness is not, however, an expression of her own feelings; it is a sign of her submission to the owner's feelings or demands. (The owner of both woman and painting.) The painting, when the King showed it to others, demonstrated this submission and his guests envied him. (52)

Here, Layton is one up on King Charles II, because he is both artist and owner of woman and poem.

Adhering to the same strategy he employs in "The Women of Rome," the poet depicts the woman's body as transcending history in a flattering attempt to keep her from entering the domain of politics. In Layton's desire to escape the present and its political threat of feminism, history is dismissed. Describing the effect of Aviva's nakedness on the Frenchmen, Layton writes:

They learned to take money from Americans
Without a feeling of revulsion towards them;
And to think of themselves
As not excessively subtle or witty.
"Au diable with Voltaire," they muttered,
"Who was a national calamity;
Au diable with la Republique.
(A race of incurable petits bourgeois, the French
Are happiest under a horse under a man)
Au diable with la Monarchie!
We saw no goddesses during either folly;
Our bald-headed savants never had told us
Such a blaze of public hair anywhere existed."

Here, the power of woman is located in her groin, and it is a seemingly awesome power which transcends history, literature

and knowledge. The male domain of politics is ostensibly negated: both Republic and Monarchy are equally condemned. By denying time, Layton is drawing attention away from the mortality of the woman's body which he is raising/lowering to the level of a monument. But even the power of her body is dependent on the male. The actual powerlessness of the woman, dependent on the male audience's inability to see past her body, is revealed in the concluding stanzas:

And when an undraped Jewish Venus,
You pointed to a child, a whole slum starving in her
eyes,
Within earshot of the Tuileries,
The French who are crazy or catholic enough
To place, facing each other, two tableaux
-One for the Men of the Convention, and one puffing
the Orators of the Restoration-
At once made a circle wide as the sky around you
While the Mayor of the Fifth Arrondissement
Addressed the milling millions of Frenchmen....

We have seen an audience of males, the mayor is naturally male, all the political figures of the "Men of the Convention" are male, but here we get the inkling that this nude woman, just by being naked and making the mute gesture of pointing to a starving child, might influence these powerful men to

improve the social condition. But even that suggestion of influence, that potential for subjecthood is denied the female object of vision. The mayor, instead of promising a school lunch program or subsidized daycare, cannot restrain himself from babbling on about Aviva's buttocks:

"See how shapely small her adorable ass is;
Of what an incredible pink rotundity each cheek.
A bas Meringovian and Valois!
A bas Charlemagne and Henri Quatre!
For all the adulations we have paid them
In our fabulous histoires
They cannot raise an erection between them. Ah,
For too long has the madness of love
Been explained to us by sensualists and cures.
A bas Stendhal! A bas Bossuet!"

So no social reforms, merely a sense that history is impotent, that writers do not do the "madness of love" as much justice as the "pink rotundity of each cheek."

While the poem is meant to be taken humorously, it also perpetrates the convention of looking at women which assumes that their authority resides solely in their bodies. Ultimately, this is not really authority at all. Maybe the corpses of political leaders and writers are unable to raise a marble erection amongst themselves but they did wield power

in their lives, the power to "do to you or for you," as Berger puts it. Now, in death, they are mere statues, but the woman is relegated to object status within her own lifetime.

This notion of a woman's power residing not in her brain or in her words, but in her body, is expressed in a much cruder fashion in the six line poem "Diversion":

Whenever I'm angry with her
and hold up my hand to slap or hit,
my darling recites some lines I've writ.

The crafty puss! She thinks that she
diverts my anger by vanity,
when it's her heaving breasts that does it. (CPIL 212)

The woman here is twice damned. She attempts to ward off the male's blows with words but they are not even her own words: they are the secondhand words of the poet. And alas, even this borrowed erudition is not enough to save her: it is her body which ultimately softens the resolve of the male poet, poised to strike.

The poem "Diversion," in addition to its implications for Layton's view of women, is also an excellent yardstick of how concerns in literary criticism have shifted in the last thirty years. The poem was criticized in the sixties by two male critics solely on formalist grounds. Robin Skelton, in a 1965

review, bemoans the poem's "extraordinary lapses of diction": "[t]he 'or hit' is unnecessary for the sense, and 'writ' is a very clumsy archaism" (141-2). And in his 1966 essay "A Grab at Proteus: Notes on Irving Layton," George Woodcock cites the poem as an example of Layton's inability to discriminate between his best and worst work. Woodcock dismisses the piece as "a joking jingle... of a kind which any versifier could whip up at two for a dollar" (162). The lack of awareness on the part of the critic in writing about a poem which simultaneously humourizes wife-beating and denies women verbal capability is only underlined by the unfortunate use of the word "whip." Woodcock goes on to observe that "[i]f the lines she recites are anything like these, the breasts of Mr. Layton's darling must put on a very spectacular exhibition!" (162).

One possible defence of Layton's gender politics would be to say that he situates both men and women within sexual stereotypes. If women are unthinking sexual beings, objects of the male gaze, men themselves are often crude and violent. Men are always crushing birds or butterflies with rocks ("Still Life," "Butterfly on Rock") or shooting frogs ("Cain") or slaughtering bull calves, ("The Bull Calf"), and, especially from the sixties onwards, massacring each other in increasing numbers. But, while it is true that Layton sees negative qualities in men, in the final analysis he also sees great positive qualities which he denies to women: it is men

who possess genius and artistic vision.

CHAPTER III

THE PROPHEMIC "I/EYE": VISION AND INACTION

The key question for Layton in his forewords, beginning in the sixties, is how the poet should respond to evil. The discursive writing fluctuates between seeing the poet as powerful and the poet as ineffectual. In The Swinging Flesh, Layton makes the following lofty claims for his art:

The dedicated poet can be a power in the land. If he did his work well, evil and arrogant men, knowing there was one about, would sleep less soundly in their beds. So would everyone else. (91)

By the next paragraph, however, this vision of power is supplanted by one of inadequacy:

Wilfrid Owen declared the poet in the present epoch could only stand by and warn. The time for warnings, however, and also for protests, is past. Today the poet can only curse. (91)

Furthermore, the foreword to Balls For a One-Armed Juggler asks the rhetorical question "[w]hat insight does the modern poet give us into the absolute evil of our times?" (Engagements 104). Layton's answer suggests that the poet

might possibly have an ameliorating effect if he were to concern himself with providing a realistic image of twentieth century man:

Nowhere is the image of man portrayed that might have stiffened us for the cruelty, perversion, systematic lying, and monstrous hypocrisy of the totalitarian regimes of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia, or the no less damnable perversion and hypocrisies of the European bourgeois and imperialists. (Engagements 105)

The passage implies that we might have prepared ourselves for the brutalities of our century if only our poets had not shirked their responsibilities. If unable to prevent the catastrophes, we might at least have been able to lessen their effects.

Layton's main criticism of modern poets is, in fact, that they have abdicated their proper role of prophet:

The major poets are children lost in a painted forest, making as much noise as they can to attract attention; the lesser ones absent-mindedly continue bringing their posies into the swept courtyards of Auschwitz and Belsen; all of them intent on proving how sensitive they are, how perceptive, how erudite and archetype-crammed. The truth is this: instead of remembering they are prophets and the

descendants of prophets, the poets have swapped roles with entertainers and culture-peddlers. They have refused the crown of thorns. Because he is a prophet, the poet must take into himself all the moral diseases, all the anguish and terror of his age, so that from them he can forge the wisdom his tortured fellowmen need to resist the forces dragging them down into the inhuman and the bestial. (Engagements 105-6)

Here, Layton is making a plea for the poet as prophet in the biblical tradition of Isaiah and Jeremiah cautioning their fellowmen about the consequences of their evil ways. Ultimately these Old Testament warnings went unheeded, but that is perhaps beside the point. What is important is that Layton's poet has an indispensable role to play in the battle of good versus evil. So far, this is almost a highbrow version of "cowboys and Indians" or "cops and robbers." It is an elaboration of a clear-cut "us versus them" ideology in which the enemy is identifiable and outside, and all the good guys have to do to triumph is to look evil straight in the eye and unblinkingly stare it down. But the picture Layton seems to be delineating for us is not that simple.

Layton expands the scope of his notion of good and evil when he writes that the poet must enter into the evil around him, descend into the "inhuman and bestial" and take into himself "all the moral diseases" of his age so that he can

strengthen the resistance of his fellowmen. This image of the poet, with the crown of thorns he willingly places on his head, is directly related to Layton's idea of the poet as man of action. The poet must be an active warrior in the battle against evil.

Layton never hesitates to inform us what this evil consists of, and an analysis of his description permits us to classify minor and major threats. Minor evils are the manifestations of a twentieth century capitalist-technological society: "the pompous fools, the frustrated busybodies, the money-lusting acquisitive dull clods and lobotomized ideologues who make it difficult for the high-spirited to live joyously...the wealthy exploiter, the affluent boor, the moralizing fraud...." (Engagements 89). They include "a tolerant elite composed of scientists, well-heeled technicians, and efficient commissars, buttressed by serviceable cadres of social workers and psychiatrists" who "play the assassins of whatever is passionate and unpredictable in human experience- that is, of art" (Engagements 93).

Major evils are rooted in the uses to which technology is put by totalitarian states. In the foreword to Balls for A One-Armed Juggler, Layton draws attention to both the technologically sophisticated viciousness of our century and the inadequacy of poetry's response when he asks rhetorically: "Where is the poet who can make clear for us Belsen? Vorkuta?"

Hiroshima? The utter wickedness of Nazism and National-Communism?" (Engagements 104). Here, Layton expresses a specific historical instance of what he later delineates as the condition of modern humanity:

Man, without a soul; man, robotized; man, tortured, humiliated, and crucified; man, driven into slave camps and death factories by devils and perverts; man, the dirtiest predator of them all. (Engagements 105)

Brian Trehearne, in the introduction to his edition of Layton's selected poems, Fornalutx, defines Layton's perception of evil as anything which threatens the freedom of the individual:

The unity of Layton's variety lies, then, in his reverence for the individual in a condition of joyful liberty. When that joy is preserved, Layton is its celebrant; when it is trampled, he is its outraged defender and chief mourner. (xxiv)

This explains Layton's indiscriminate lumping together of the "money-lusting acquisitive dull clods" with the Nazi and Communist thugs: both, albeit to severely varying degrees, attempt to thwart the "joyful liberty" of the individual.

If the poet's role is just to *describe* the evil for the

benefit of his reader who will then know the horrible truth and consequently be inspired to engage in moral action, Layton could be said to have done his duty with honour. In such an event, Layton, who has written about murdered artists, victims of the Holocaust, and war in general, can be said to have been true to his maxim of looking directly into the face of evil and writing about it clearly. Perhaps most notable in Layton's lifting the curtain on wickedness have been his poems about animals: he has written so many poems about animals being trapped, burned, shot, crushed that he could almost publish a book of "Animal Poems" to go with his Jewish poems, or Love poems, or Greek poems. Indeed, if reading Layton's poems about animals would prompt the reader to join a humane society or protest the fur industry, then Layton could be said to be doing his work. Unfortunately, however, it is rather difficult to assess Layton's moralizing effects on his readers. A more feasible approach involves the examination of how successfully the poetic/prophetic "I" acquits himself within the poem, particularly in poems in which the persona is presented as actually perceiving evil.

In poems such as "The Improved Binoculars," "The Bull Calf" and "Mr. Ther-Apis," the prophetic "I" recognizes the nature of the evil he is observing, but he is unable or unwilling to do anything about it. Through his passivity he becomes an accomplice to the violence he is beholding. In this way, he becomes identified with the general mass of

humanity who are both victims and perpetrators of violence. In recognizing the prophetic "I's" ineptitude in the sphere of action and violence, Layton carves out a separate sphere for the "I," the realm of the imagination which is posited as a way of "transcending" evil.

"The Improved Binoculars," a key poem in Layton's construction of the myth of the poet as seer, is a study in both alienation and identification. The nature of the poet/prophet is solitary: he possesses the omniscience and the isolation of a god. He looks down on suffering humanity from a great height and he sees various aspects of evil: selfishness and abandonment of duty in the firemen, inhumanity and greed in the agent, fickleness in the lovers, opportunism in the dignitaries, and sadism in the general population:

Below me the city was in flames:
the firemen were the first to save
themselves. I saw steeples fall on their knees.

I saw an agent kick the charred bodies
from an orphanage to one side, marking
the site carefully for a future speculation.

Lovers stopped short of the final spasm
and went off angrily in opposite directions,
their elbows held by giant escorts of fire.

Then the dignitaries rode across the bridges
under an auricle of light which delighted them,
noting for later punishment those that went before.

The poem has been identified by Seymour Mayne as a metaphor for the poet's focused poetic vision, (Irving Layton: The Poet and His Critics 11), the binoculars representing the poet's ability to see things which we cannot, and which the people down in the burning city cannot. And they cannot see precisely because their vision is limited by their proximity to the conflagration. The poet, on the other hand, unafraid to climb to great heights, is rewarded with a panoramic view from the safety of his mountain eyrie.

Secure in his position of relative height, the "I" does not physically go down into the valley, but he descends metaphorically through the agency of his "eye." It is through his faculty of vision that he enters into the destruction below and his connection to the rest of humanity is revealed. This is essentially because the "I/eye" sees the evil but does nothing to fight it, thus fulfilling only half the poet's exalted role. Because the "I" does nothing, he becomes a silent accomplice to the murder and mayhem going on below him. The supposedly superior position of the poet, contingent on superhuman vision, is revealed by Layton in the final lines of the poem to be on an equal footing with the rest of humanity who are enduring and committing acts of evil:

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.

All this I saw through my improved binoculars.
(CPIL 139)

By drawing attention to the denizens in the town who are primarily concerned with viewing the destruction of their neighbours and then immediately referring to the "I," whose people-watching is benefitting from the same fiery illumination, Layton effectively draws a parallel between the two. The "I" of the poem is no better, gazing at the destruction through his fancy binoculars, than the rest of the populace "asking/ Only for more light with which to see/ their neighbour's destruction": both are doing nothing concrete to alleviate suffering and both are primarily concerned with having a clear view.

The same process, in which the prophetic "I" is identified with guilty humanity, is even more explicitly delineated in the "The Bull Calf." Considered by Woodcock as an elegy mourning humanity's callous mistreatment of defenceless animals (171), the poem is perhaps even more about

the failed role of the poetic "I/eye." In "The Rampant 'I': Irving Layton Re-assessed," Frederick Goldsworthy offers a reading of the poem which challenges the prevailing view that the central theme of the poem is the "I's" sympathy for the innocent calf. As evidence that "some of the gentle 'romantic' or tender poems are not nearly as gentle as their surface sometimes suggests," Goldsworthy argues that there is an ongoing distancing in the poem between the "I" and the action (140). Goldsworthy quotes the following lines to illustrate his point:

I thought of the deposed Richard II

My gaze slipped off his hat toward the empty sky that
circled over the black knot of men,
over us and the calf waiting for the first blow.

I turned away and wept. (140)

Goldsworthy observes that "the 'I' is not involved in the decision of the course of the action" (140). He also concedes that "presumably both Freeman and the Christian pastor are more culpable than the 'I'" (141), but he then draws the following conclusion:

Since the portraits of the other characters are, at

least, cynical, and since it is only the "I" and the fellows, the poem seems to become a strong statement of the difference between the "I" and his fellows. The fate of the bull calf is not nearly as important or significant as the position of the "I". For though the "I" as a human being is involved in the fate of the rest of mankind- he is included in the 'black knot of men' over which the sky, like a vulture, ominously 'circled'- his ability to see the situation in the terms in which he does gives him a certain independence from them, a certain power to see and to know more than they. Even a poem such as this, then, has at least some of the same qualities of selfishness, arrogance and distancing that characterize the more openly abrasive poems. (141)

Goldsworthy's argument that the "I" is more important than the bull calf is useful up to a point- and the point at which it stops being useful is that it is not surprising, given Layton's preoccupation with the nature of the prophet's vision, that the prophetic "I" watching the action unfold is predominant. But even then, to be fair, Layton does give the calf some subjecthood. The first lines of the poem put the calf at centre stage as much as possible, given that he/it is not the author of the poem. Layton does this by having the calf see the men:

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. (CPIL 22)

And yet, the calf ultimately remains in a secondary position. Despite his ability to see, he/it cannot escape the position of being seen by the "I/eye" looking at the men.

Although the "I" is the central figure here, Goldsworthy's interpretation of the "I's" significance can be questioned. While Goldsworthy admits that the "I" is a part of humanity, he essentially argues that the "I" is ultimately being distinguished from the others, specifically by the poet's ability "to see the situation in the terms that he does" giving him the "power to see and to know more than" the other men. Woodcock takes this point further when he claims that the poet becomes identified with the victimized bull calf (171). Arguably, however, the "I" is made to identify with the men, specifically with the man who strikes the actual blow. The beginning of this process of identification, conveyed simply enough through the use of the first person plural pronouns, occurs in the second stanza:

"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 toward the empty sky
that circled over the black knot of men,
over us and the calf waiting for the first blow.

The "I/eye" here affirms his complicity in evil by looking away- he averts his eyes like the poets Layton decries, unwilling to face the impending blow. The use of the pronoun "us" shows him to be part of the group of men. The following stanza, while making the calf the viewer and the men objects of his gaze, again identifies the "I/eye" with the perpetrators of the slaughter:

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.

Here the calf begins as object/subject, viewed and viewer.

The primary subject of the "I/eye" sees the calf looking at the men. Again, the first person plural pronouns "us and "we" show that the "I" includes himself among the group of guilty men: the gaze of the calf has the objects retreating until "we were only the ponderous mallet," indicating that the "I" is identifying himself with the others as the weapon of killing, and finally the calf becomes complete object as corpse.

The last line, "I turned away and wept," criticized by Purdy for its sentimentality (149), can be seen as the sensitive poetic "I/eye" reacting differently from the other men who presumably do not weep. However, in one sense, the "I" is more guilty than the others precisely because he is able to see the significance of the senseless slaughter and yet does nothing.

The poem "Mr. Ther-Apis" depicts the "I" passively watching a violent act and implicitly draws a connection between vision which does not lead to action and impotence. The "I" begins by describing a joyless bourgeois house:

I saw no friend blooming
In the ugly middle-class parlour
But only chromium knick-knacks
And ugly middle-class furniture.

On his wife's face the hard lines
Of pride like lesions;

A middle-class harpy, she
Sat beside her glass of gin.

And they both said: "We like
Chinese food immensely." He:
"Look at my income tax returns."

I could see they were not happy. (CPIL 112)

Characteristically, the "I" can see things about people which they do not perceive themselves. Then Mr. Ther-Apis, a play on therapist but also a direct allusion to the life-force symbolized by the sacred bull Apis of Egyptian religion, arrives:

But when Mr. Ther-Apis came
He did not announce himself.

I was aghast to discover
He had the face of a bull.
All evening, not once did he frown,
Nor did he smile;

But sat there like some fleshy god
On their gleaming sofa:
I thought, then, of the epigraph
To Kuprin's Yama.

When the assault on Mr. Ther-Apis is finally signalled,
the observing "I" has at least several seconds to intervene
but he remains complacently spellbound:

When finally he arose
On his sturdy legs
And reached for the plateful
Of Egyptian figs.

That was the signal
Between my friend and his wife;
She rolled away the cushion
And uncovered the knife.

My friend's face grew pale
But she was past alarm;
"Mr. Ther-Apis," she said,
"You'll come to harm."

On one level a parable about the bourgeois destruction of
the irrational and pagan joy impulse, the poem is also about
the powerlessness of the perceiving "I" who watches the
castration of Mr. Therapis:

And there before my horrorstruck eyes
They snipped off his balls

And plated them with chromium
Into a pair of handrails.

By passively observing the act of emasculation, the "I" participates in his own symbolic castration. As Mr. Ther-Apis loses the power of his genitals, the "I" simultaneously abdicates his own claim to morality and virility through his impotent act of vision. The "I" sees the horror and yet does nothing.

Layton has always been concerned with the poet's relationship to violence. Numerous poems stress the gap between poetry, especially the effete/academic kind (synonyms in Layton's lexicon), and the life of action. Layton never hesitates to remind his readers of the inadequacy of poetry in the face of violence. Thus you have the admonition in the four line "Lesson for Today":

"Acquit yourself like a man,"
said the grey-haired poet to his son;
and with a wry smile gave him
a bomb, a bowie knife and a gun. (CPIL 485)

There is also the similar mood and the more explicit conclusion reached in "After Auschwitz." The first stanza stresses the inferiority of words to bullets:

My son,
don't be a waffling poet;
let each word you write
be direct and honest
like the crack of a gun (CPIL 535)

The last stanza upsets the traditional wisdom concerning the longevity of words and hammers home Layton's point about the inarticulate authority of violence:

Despite memorial plaques
of horror and contrition
repentance, my son,
is short-lived;
an automatic rifle, however,
endures
a lifetime

Layton's perceived need to assume the burden of proof regarding the mettle of the writer in a world of physical violence finds its simplest expression in "Homage To Ben Jonson." The poem opens with a rhyming list of hapless poets undone by the brute strength of their social inferiors:

Legend says a drunken churl
Did for Villon in a brawl.

The dagger of a lout
Squeezed the brains of Marlowe out.

Pushkin was slain in a duel
By an aristocratic fool.

Another poet, I forgot the one,
Ran from a pointed gun.

The final couplets provide a more positive role model in the person of Ben Jonson who effectively proves the old adage that "the pen is mightier than the sword" by skilfully murdering his opponent:

But soldier Ben Jonson
Very fitly killed his man

Lest the merest worm's food
Presumptuous grown and rude

Establish beyond discord
The pen inferior to the sword. (CP1L 321)

Sensing the writer's distance from, if not inferiority to, the man of action, Layton takes great pains to distinguish between two types of writers: creative writers and critics.

In the foreword to A Red Carpet for the Sun, Layton asserts, "Unlike the scholar or literary historian who writes about life, the poet enjoys it, *lives it*" (87). Yet even when Layton is aggressively drawing comparisons between the poet and the critic, he acknowledges that the poet is still at one remove from life. Referring to the poet in the preface to The Laughing Rooster, Layton writes:

It is with *his* personal experience and what *he* has done with it that critic, theorist, and educator concern themselves; it is with *his* feeling for life, *his* ability to evoke and recreate the illusion of it. For all their brilliancy, wit, erudition, concern, good citizenship, and throw in the kitchen sink as well, they cannot make us *feel* life: that remains forever within the province and capacity of the artist alone. (117)

For all the poet's vaunted superiority to the critic, he cannot give us life, but merely its "illusion" and its "feeling."

Layton qualifies the poet's aptitude for action in two famous passages in "The Birth of Tragedy" and "The Fertile Muck." The opening lines of "The Birth of Tragedy" show poetry is not merely an aspect of, but actually includes, the realm of experience within its boundaries:

And me happiest when I compose poems.

Love, power, the huzza of battle
are something, are much;
yet a poem includes them like a pool
water and reflection. (CPIL 121)

Here, Layton subordinates the active life to the encompassing work of art. Poetry's relation to action for Layton is also delineated in the lines from "The Fertile Muck," in the final rhetorical question and its famous answer:

How to dominate reality? Love is one way;
imagination another. (CPIL 28)

Poetry, that is the realm not of action but of the imagination, is seen wishfully as a way of "dominating" or surpassing reality. Thus we have the explanation for the curious passage in the foreword to The Shattered Plinths in which Layton confides:

Many of the poems in the present collection were written during the early weeks of this June when like many others I lived through the tense days preceding the Israeli-Arab armed conflict in the Middle East. (14)

Admittedly, Layton lived through the experience of *feeling*

tense, but he did not live through the events themselves as he implies here, and Richard Sommer, in a rather virulent review of the book, takes Layton to task for this statement. Writing of the book's failure to shock, Sommer argues:

The main reason for this is that the "grave contemporary anguish" which the reader is to experience vicariously through Layton, is itself vicariously experienced, a June war fought on the beaches of the Riviera. Layton has never shot or tortured an Arab or hurled a bomb, and the only grim unpalatable truth to emerge from these poems is that he wishes he could. (183)

Sommer quotes the following two statements from Layton's foreword: "'As a poet I've claimed the right to enter imaginatively into the seminal tensions and dilemmas of our age'" and "'If we know the grim, unpalatable truth about ourselves we might in time learn to restrain our most destructive impulses'" (181). Sommer then comments:

These last two statements will give Layton's audience their old vicarious thrill and the security they require. The poet-adventurer will do it for them. He will enter the Age of Statistical Violence, though only "imaginatively," and will return with a truth which, if it is really unpalatable, can hardly be expected to teach

civilized restraint. The contradictions here will probably correspond to a like ambivalence in Layton's audience, and will make his book a commercial success.
(181)

While Layton's claim about "living" through a war might be stretching the truth, he does admit the poet's role: "to enter *imaginatively*" into his age (my italics). We do not expect our soldiers and politicians to be poets: we can hardly expect the reverse.

By its very nature, poetry is vicarious. Despite Hemingway's assertion that the writer must experience something before he can write about it, writers contravene Hemingway's maxim everyday, and the very fact of living through an experience is no guarantee that one can write about it successfully. One of Layton's poems exploring the theme of evil also reveals this eternal gap between imagination and reality. "The Lesson," with its low-key, matter-of-fact diction, attempts to recreate the illusion of life, to make us feel the absolute horror and terror of violence:

This is a finger

This is an eye

Even a small cut causes pain, afterwards soreness;
the terror comes when a bone-shattering bullet

enters the neck, the groin
or the blood rushes after the retreating knife

The thought of death,
of being suddenly reduced to nothing
makes the lips go white

You must say to yourself
this is not film, this is real
and it's happening to a man
who was once an infant and cried in the dark

Those are real intestines
spilling out into his hand;
the pain and terror are real

Let's begin again
This is a finger
This is an eye (DH 16)

Here, Layton is not only concerned with the nature of violence but with the inability of poetry to express it, let alone confront it. The poem, with its admonition that "this is not film, this is real," reminding us that the film medium has desensitized us to the impact of the violence it portrays, is made more poignant and on one level ironic by the fact that

the only "real" thing happening here is the poem itself. The poem is always at one remove from life and the poet operates not in the realm of "reality" but in the realm of the "imagination."

One of the key poems which explores the theme of vision and imagination in response to violence is "A Tall Man Executes A Jig." The poem opens with the tall man lying down in the midst of nature. At this point, however, he has not yet merged with his surroundings and he is shielded from the ground by the interceding blanket:

So the man spread his blanket on the field
And watched the shafts of light between the tufts
And felt the sun push the grass towards him;
The noise he heard was that of whizzing flies....
(CPIL 383)

Characteristically, the primary sense here for Layton is vision. The tall man first watches, then he feels, and then he hears.

In the second stanza, the tall man faces his first minor temptation, a foreshadowing of the major test to come, when he is stung by the jigging flies. He does not swat them or brush them off but he sympathizes with them, beginning the imaginative process of identification with nature which will continue throughout the poem:

He felt the sting and tingle afterwards
Of those leaving their orthodox unrest,
Leaving their undulant excitation
To drop upon his sleeveless arm. The grass,
Even the wildflowers became black hairs
And himself a maddened speck among them.
Still the assaults of the small flies made him
Glad at last, until he saw purest joy
In their frantic jiggings under a hair,
So changed from those in the unrestraining air.

The tall man, seeing the flies irritating him in his hair, *imagines*, and imagines is the central point here, himself as a fly caught up in the "black hairs" of the wildflowers.

The third stanza stresses the nature of the artist and his relationship with nature: he is the giver of form and meaning to shapelessness and chaos. Noteworthy, too, is the subjectivity of the tall man: he *is* not enormous but rather he *feels* himself enormous:

He stood up and felt himself enormous.
Felt as might Donatello over stone,
Or Plato, or as a man who has held
A loved and lovely woman in his arms
And feels his forehead touch the emptied sky
Where all antinomies flood into light.

Yet jig jig, the haloing black jots
Meshed with the wheeling fire of the sun:
Motion without meaning, disquietude
Without sense or purpose, ephemerides
That mottled the resting summer air till
Gusts swept them from his sight like wisps of smoke
Yet they returned, bringing a bee who, seeing
But a tall man, left him for a marigold.

It is the imagination of the artist which gives meaning to the motion of the universe, sense and purpose to its disquietude.

In the fourth stanza, the jiggling flies dissipate and the tall man moves off his blanket to wait for a revelation:

He stood still and waited. If ever
That hour of revelation was come
It was now, here on the transfigured steep.
The sky darkened. Some birds chirped. Nothing else.
He thought the dying god had gone to sleep:
An Indian fakir on his mat of nails.

At this point he sees nothing, but then, in the fifth stanza, the tall man sees the revelation, the temptation, not in the sky but on the ground when he looks down:

He dropped his head and let fall the halo

Of mountains, purpling and silent as time,
To see temptation coiled before his feet:
A violated grass snake that lugged
Its intestines 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;
Of earth's vivid tongue that flicked in praise of earth.

Layton is replacing the traditional symbol of the snake as evil with that of the snake as life-force. The tragedy is every bit as real as that of the bull calf: the snake is equally innocent. The temptation for the tall man is to react in a certain way to what he sees. Will he decry the senseless evil in the world? Will he try to help the helpless snake?

In the sixth stanza, we see the tall man weeping like the "I" in "The Bull Calf." As in "The Bull Calf," the act of crying is a form of self-pity. The "I" realizes his inability to prevent violence:

And the man wept because pity was useless.
"Your jig's up; the flies come like kites," he said
And watched the grass snake crawl towards the hedge,
Convulsing and dragging into the dark
The satchel filled with curses for the earth,
For the odours of warm sedge, and the sun,

A blood-red organ in the dying sky.
Backwards it fell into a grassy ditch
Exposing its underside, white as milk,
And mocked by wisps of hay between its jaws;
And then it stiffened to its final length.
But though it opened its thin mouth to scream
A last silent scream that shook the black sky,
Adamant and fierce, the tall man did not curse.

The tall man, although part of nature himself, rises above the example of the snake who curses the senseless violence of the universe. The tall man does not curse. He does not give into temptation but succumbs instead to his imagination:

Beside the rigid snake the man stretched out
In fellowship of death; he lay silent
And stiff in the heavy grass with eyes shut,
Inhaling the moist odours of the night
Through which his mind tunnelled with flicking tongue
Backwards to caves, mounds, and sunken ledges
And desolate cliffs where come only kites,
And where of perished badgers and raccoons
The claws alone remain, gripping the earth.
Meanwhile the green snake 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; and as the weary man
Stood up, coiled above his head, transforming all.

The man deliberately shuts his eyes to the outside world: he turns away from the "reality" of senselessness and violence to identify with the snake. In Sommer's terms, the tall man enjoys *vicariously* the "rigid fellowship of death." He proceeds to imagine the life of the now dead snake and consequently the fertile green snake of his imagination, the result of his "imaginatively entering into" the "tensions and dilemmas" around him, creeps up into the sky. Thus, the poet figure of the tall man affirms the life principle through his vision. He conquers or transcends mortality not as a politician or as a worker for the Red Cross in the real world but as a poet through the action of his imagination. It is this almost oxymoronic phrase, "the action of his imagination," which nearly permits Layton to have his cake and eat it. His prophetic "I" can imaginatively transcend the reality of violence. This, however, glosses over the fact that although the tall man creates an imaginary snake, he has no effect on the real snake. Thus, the only one benefitting from this imaginative faculty is the tall man.

Patricia Keeney Smith recognizes that "A Tall Man Executes a Jig" is "Layton's poetic story of man as he responds to death" (195). She also argues that the poem

culminates in the "transformation" of nature into art through the tall man (197). While this talk of transformation is perhaps suitable for literary analysis, it is rather useless to the violated snake. Perhaps a better word than "transformation" to describe the tall man's response to violence would be Layton's idea of transcendence, although even transcendence fails to come to terms completely with the relationship between art and reality.

Layton attempts to assess art's relation to suffering in his foreword to A Red Carpet for the Sun:

Though art transcends pain and tragedy, it does not negate them, does not make them disappear. Whatever its more perversid devotees may think and write, poetry does not exorcise historical dynamism, macabre cruelty, guilt, perversity, and the pain of consciousness. (85)

This paradox, in which "art transcends pain and tragedy" but "does not negate them," returns us to the central ideas of "The Fertile Muck" and "The Birth of Tragedy" in which poetry "dominates" or "includes" reality. While such a belief can be gratifying to both poet and reader, who may then comfortably assume they are participating in a valid act, it also increases the likelihood that an artistic response to violence, Keeney's "transformation" of nature into art, might usurp the place of an active response to violence.

It is to preclude such a scenario, in which the poetic persona's activity and rhetoric are mistaken for real action, that Layton takes pains, in poems such as "The Improved Binoculars" and "The Bull Calf," to depict the prophetic "I's" observation of the violence around him as passive, and to stress the role of the poet/prophet as primarily imaginative. Ultimately, it is this ongoing conscientious self-critique of his prophetic gaze that distinguishes Layton's incessant moralizing and prophetic admonitions from the smugness and self-righteousness which he decries.

CONCLUSION

Plato aimed to exclude poets from his Republic and Layton seems to be making a similar case in his poetry. While Layton's conclusions are not as severe, his work strikes the cautionary note of Caveat Legens: Reader Beware. This admonition to beware the poet, underpinning all of Layton's other "prophetic" warnings to fear the philistine, the feminist, and the totalitarian, is both disturbing and reassuring. It is disturbing because it undermines the authority of the poet as articulator of absolute truth and morality. It is equally reassuring precisely because it undermines the authority of the poet as articulator of absolute truth and morality. The presence of self-awareness and self-criticism is necessary for any realization of truth or morality.

Layton's poetry is informed by three major aspects of the Twentieth Century: the bourgeois-capitalist, what Layton would call "philistine," society and the corresponding decline in poetry as a popular art; the struggle for equality on the part of women; and the rise of totalitarianism. Layton experiences the first two personally. The third is entered into "imaginatively," in Layton's terms, or is "vicariously experienced" in the words of Richard Sommer. Layton takes the opportunity to resist all three in his poetry, and when his work is studied in the next century it may largely be in the context of how it responds to each of these socio-political

developments.

Faced with the threat of poetry losing out to more popular forms of culture and "philistinism," or uncultured money-grubbing, Layton posits the poet as a superior imaginative being. However, despite Layton's obvious aversion to both the bourgeois bogeyman and poetry's diminishing appeal, he does not refrain from identifying the weak points in the artistic vision.

Some of these ostensible weaknesses of the poet's gaze can be viewed as strengths. By suggesting the flimsy, dreamlike and artificial qualities of the poet's vision, Layton's poetry implicitly dismisses the claims to universality or absolute truth of *any* vision, be it personal, artistic or political. This is an essentially moral enterprise, an anti-totalitarian project providing a critique of any system which seeks to cloak its ideology in the guise of absolute truth and to impose its beliefs on others. The profoundly personal and subjective elements of the poet's gaze are themselves antithetical to totalitarianism: Layton affirms the worth of the individual in the face of conformity.

At the same time, Layton qualifies the poet's ability to confront evil. Layton rails in prophetic guise against physical violence, but the prophetic figures within his poetry are shown to be powerless when actually confronted with any manifestation of physical destruction. In this way, Layton emphasizes the danger of depending upon those whose only

weapons are words. Layton's particular contribution in this regard is both a condemnation of violence in general and a recognition of the artist's inability to respond effectively.

In his resistance to women's struggle for equality, Layton resorts to an atavistic vision in which the male is superior to the female because of his artistic potential: the male subject creates while the female object poses. Layton has been increasingly vilified for his profoundly sexist poetry. What began as a political judgement is becoming a critical judgement. The poet who was initially celebrated for storming the walls of puritanism is now vilified for creating conventionally stereotyped images of women.

In Layton's construction of himself as poet, he repeatedly disassociates himself from the academic and the effete. He affirms again and again, almost protesting too much, that the "poet *lives* life." Not one to shy away from contradictions, Layton also reminds us, with the same trademark sense of assurance, that "all poetry, in the final analysis, is about poetry itself" (Engagements 84).

Layton's prodigious output of poetry often functions as a commentary on Life with a capital "L": love, death, sex, and hatred are some of his favourite themes. In this sense Layton can justly claim that his work represents "a truthful account of the world as I experienced it" (Engagements 121). In the final analysis, however, Layton's work has much, if not more, to say about the nature of the poet as Layton himself

experienced it.

Layton's poetry reveals a poet who is alienated, but his awareness of his own condition depends on context and fluctuates to a large degree. Layton readily perceives his distance from humanity but rather than classifying it as merely an aspect of a larger picture of general alienation he stakes claim to his isolated position as the exclusive fiefdom of the poet. Furthermore, while Layton appears to be bitterly aware of the inability of his imaginative vision to successfully confront violence, he remains blissfully incognizant of the destructive nature of his own position in relation to women. While furiously objectifying and degrading women in many of his poems, Layton cheerfully clings to the belief that he is indeed writing poems of love. It is this uneasy marriage of self-consciousness and apparent lack of self-knowledge that informs and determines Layton's preoccupation with the paradox of the universal and the subjective.

In "The Birth of Tragedy," Layton locates the tension between the universal and the subjective within the role of the poet as articulator and resolver of dichotomies:

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.

This idea of the poet serving as a mouthpiece for nature, humanity included, implies both a sense of equality with, and a sense of superiority to, humanity in general. If the poet is to have anything to write about, and if he is to communicate what he writes to anybody other than himself, he must to some extent share both a common way of seeing and a common experience with his fellow human beings. The very fact, however, that the poet is able to express his vision and experience in poetic form implies, for Layton at least, not only a basic difference from humanity in general but a certain superiority.

"In the Midst of My Fever," "The Birth of Tragedy" and "The Fertile Muck," show Layton grasping in vain for a state in which the distinctions between the poet and everybody else might collapse. In the end, however, these poems' emphasis on the faulty, artificial, and essentially subjective nature of the poet's gaze highlight Layton's failure to communicate his vision fully. Paradoxically, it is precisely the poet's inability to speak for and to humanity in general that serves most to affirm his place within the community of humankind. Layton's ways of seeing cannot literally be our own, but they are like ours in as much as their focus is multiple, contradictory, incomplete, and ultimately subjective.

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