

FIRE IMAGERY IN THE POETRY OF
IRVING LAYTON

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Abstract

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Fire imagery exists as a consistent pattern of symbolism in the poetry of Irving Layton. This prominent symbol articulates the poet's vision of reality. Acting as the only true, unalterable mode of Being, fire becomes the measure whereby the poet defines the universe, society and himself.

The first part of this thesis will trace Layton's attempts to understand, dominate, and inter-relate with reality. As lover, poet and philosopher (contemplator), Layton is concerned with his own personal, existential participation in the antinomial process of the cosmic flame. Part two will show Layton's struggle to measure himself as passionate poet against the masses. Using fire once more as his measure, the poet identifies with the fine excess of the sun, and defines himself against the smoking decadence of modern man.

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Table of Contents.

	<u>Page</u>
Chapter I. The Burning Cosmos--A Vision of Reality.	
i) The Macrocosm.	1
ii) The Microcosm.	10
iii) The Interaction of the Macrocosm and the Microcosm.	16
PART I.	
Chapter II. Poems of Contemplation.	23
Chapter III. Love,	39
Chapter IV. The Poet.	65
PART II.	
Chapter V. Social Fires.	82
Chapter VI. The European Culture.	101
Chapter VII. The Antipodeans.	115
Conclusion.	133

Chapter I.

The Burning Cosmos¹ - A Vision of Reality.

1) The Macrocosm.

In his poetry, Layton portrays the universe in constant flux; change is the only reality. His central symbol to express this belief is the flame, which has the dual character of motion and repose contained within the fluctuating bounds of its existence.² A flame furthermore, acts as a catalyst, consuming and transforming without losing its identity; thus it establishes a certain rhythm in the universe, and acts as a point of fusion where all change simultaneously arises and is extinguished. Due to the presence of energy

¹Irving Layton, "Poem For The Next Century," in The Collected Poems of Irving Layton (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd.; 1971), p. 361. Unless indicated, all quotations are taken from this text.

²Layton's use and understanding of fire imagery closely resembles the philosophy of Heraclitus. Together with other early Greek philosophers, Heraclitus believed that the world was in a constant state of flux. Fire was the element that motivated all change--all things arose and returned to fire. The quality of a flame burning steadily was a useful image to portray this universal flux. The pure fire is located in the sun.

This conception of universal flux was not original; all presocratic philosophers had noted the dominance of change within the world. Heraclitus, however, was interested in the stability that pervaded that flux, the measure inherent in change. This measure is produced by an unending strife between opposites. All opposites however, are one and the same, a continuum, inseparable halves of the same thing. Thus, good and evil, hot and cold, etc. must exist, for if one should disappear it would lead to cessation of strife.

John Burnet, Early Greek Philosophy (London: Adams and Charles Black, 1963), pp. 133-141.

G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), pp. 186-88.

within a given boundary, the nature of this change is dialectical; a balanced tension exists in the universal process.³

Layton's use of the flame to express this vision of reality is exemplified in many poems. The poet exists in a universe of fire. There are flames in the green grass,⁴ in the snow,⁵ and in the sky.⁶ The trees around him burn,⁷ and the gardens too.⁸ Birds sing in an " . . . inflammable air . . .,"⁹ chipmunks " . . . break like flames from the bleak earth./ And the sun's golden scarabs on the surface/ Are aimless, nameless, scintillant . . ."¹⁰ Cities burn,¹¹

³Layton points to his source of fire imagery in "The Poet Entertains Several Ladies," p. 140.

And the driftwood I perceive
in the spray and lifting mist, twisting tongues
licking the shore, only momentarily
blackens an antique lamp; rots
and settles back into the Heraclitean fire.

⁴"Love The Conqueror Worm," p. 83.

⁵"I Can Sleep Beside My Lady," p. 576.

⁶"Fishermen," p. 517.

⁷"Spikes," p. 185. "Autumn Lines For My Son," p. 354.

⁸"Undine," p. 183.

⁹"The Birth of Tragedy," p. 121.

¹⁰"My Flesh Comfortless," p. 370.

¹¹"Entry," p. 577. "The Improved Binoculars," p. 139.

women burn,¹² lovers burn,¹³ the poet's father burns,¹⁴ souls burn,¹⁵ and Layton himself burns.¹⁶ His poems oscillate with the imagery of flame which exists in every sphere and in every element of this ". . . . burning cosmos"17

Within nature, the process of growth and death exemplifies the energy, rhythm, change, and tension that is embodied in the concept of flame. The flamboyant autumn leaves,¹⁸ the ecstasy of the blade pushing the sod to one side,¹⁹ the fierce survival pattern of animals,²⁰ all portray a rhythmic interaction of unending development and decay.

In "Logos"²¹ the poet portrays the manifestation of the universal process in the phenomena of nature, and envisions it as a thrust toward existence, an irrational Dionysian thrust in which the universe is a place of becoming.

¹²"For Louise, Age 17," p. 164.

Irving Layton, "Stella Ioannou (1894-1972)," in Lovers and Lesser Men (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1973), p. 18. (LLM)

¹³"The Satyr," p. 166. "Mrs. Potiphar," p. 280.

¹⁴"Death of Moishe Lazarovitch," p. 87.

¹⁵"To A Very Old Woman," p. 56. "The Benediction," LLM, p. 28.

¹⁶"Letter From A Straw Man," p. 172. "New Tables," p. 326.

¹⁷"Poem For The Next Century," p. 361.

¹⁸"The Buffaloes," p. 148. "Autumn Lines For My Son," p. 354.

¹⁹"Joseph K-," p. 213.

²⁰"On Spanish Soil," p. 249.

²¹"Logos," p. 286.

I come suddenly on some bush, ferns,
Cove grass, or birds that flock after flock
Spring from the deep gorges the sun burns:
Lizards running into clefts of rock

I laugh and praise the Dionysian
Everywhere irrational thrust
That sends meteors spilling into dust,
This enchantment risen in the bone.²²

The movement of the poem pivots upon a balanced tension of continual change akin to the oscillations of the cosmic flame. Rising flocks of birds springing from deep gorges equilibrate the lizards running into clefts of rock. The motion of the animals and the thrusting growth of ". . . bush, ferns, / Cove grass . . ." ²³ that simultaneously penetrate deep into the earth and reach towards the sun, exhibit the antinomial nature of the universe. The ecstatic motion of the animals, and the persistence of floral growth are defined by the solidity of rock. The microcosms, (birds, lizards, ferns, bush, cove grass) are identified against a macrocosmic vision of meteors. ". . . Everywhere . . ." ²⁴ the ". . . Dionysian / . . . irrational thrust" ²⁵ pushes itself into existence, precipitated by a sun that burns. This inexhaustible energy

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid. Throughout Layton's poetry there is a continual upward-downward movement which portrays this dialectical vision of reality, e.g. "The Buffaloes," p. 148, "The Poet Entertains Several Ladies," p. 140, "The Birth Of Tragedy," p. 121, "Mont Rolland," p. 14.

²⁴"Logos," p. 286

²⁵Ibid.

is defined against the cosmic decay of ". . . meteors spilling into dust"26 The universal energy overflows into its antithesis, and antinomial tension is "the axis upon which all change revolves."27

The greatest and purest embodiment of flame may be seen in the sun--". . . That without cease gives yet never grows less . . ."28 In "Metamorphosis"29 Layton portrays the sun as the pivotal point of all change:

I looked up expecting fire
To find instead
Red flowers and inert stalks
And through the grasses
Snapped from too much heat
Irregular shadows in the trees
Of leaf on leaf.

New butterflies went round my chair
And stitched me there;
I could not move but sat as one
Hypnotized by the sun;
Then as my limbs grew mould,
Grew stems and grass
I saw a thrush.

And with that attention
Envy lends
I steered its sunward flight
Till, dispossessed, I caught
The motion of the bird
And heard within my blood
Its singing pleasure.30

26 Ibid.

27 This concept of antinomial tension was portrayed by Nietzsche in Thus Spake Zarathustra. Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, trans. Thomas Common (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1930). "And this secret spake Life herself unto me. "Behold," said she, "I am that which must ever surpass itself. . . ." Ibid., p. 136.

28 "The Fine Excess," LLM, p. 19.

29 "Metamorphosis," p. 167.

30 Ibid.

The sun's presence establishes a symmetry and order within the universal flux; strategically situated at the centre of this poem, it symbolizes a point of fusion where all change simultaneously arises and ceases. Two other short poems portray this characteristic of the sun.

As the angry hawk flies towards the sun,
Taking some small creature into the skies,
So shall your fame be taloned fast to mine
And like the clawed rodent rise as I rise,
("Beutel's Name Is Inscribed For Eternal Life")³¹

Swiftly darting in the setting light,
The doomed sparrow feels the falcon's wings.
How beautiful are they both in flight.
("Divine Image")³²

For the victor and victim the sun exists as a focal point of life and death. The sun is the catalyst that precipitates all metamorphosis. Furthermore, it imposes an inherent, cyclical order upon the universe, that renders the fluctuations to be rhythmic and harmonious; it establishes regularity (flux), instead of chaos, and is the cardinal point of development and decay.

The sun dominates the process of change in nature; by its measured, diurnal passage it brings dawn³³ and spring,³⁴ evening³⁵ and winter.³⁶ Through its influence natural phenomena grow, ripen and die.³⁷

³¹"Beutel's Name Is Inscribed For Eternal Life," p. 223.
³²"Divine Image," p. 337.
³³"Birds At Daybreak," p. 6. "Fishermen," p. 517.
³⁴"Compliments of the Season," p. 52.
³⁵"The Buffaloes," p. 148. "Blaza de Toros," p. 201
³⁶"Two Songs For Sweet Voices," p. 372.
³⁷"Chokecherries," p. 23. "Red Chokecherries," p. 85.

The sun's gift--

but the leaves a sickly green;
the more exposed curling; showing
a bleached white, many with ragged
holes;
Caterpillars have been
here
sliding their slow destructive bodies
over them.

I think of them, the leaves, as hoplites
or as anything ingloriously
useful,
suffering, dying . . .

But the chokecherries,
ah;
Still, the leaves' sacrifice
is acrid on the tongue.³⁸

The transmutation of matter to flame occurs through loss.
Similarly, the irrational Dionysian thrust to life, involves
sacrifice, suffering, and pain. The sun exemplifies the
creative/destructive dichotomic characteristic of fire.
Growth is a process of death and wherever the sun spreads
its bounty it also casts its shadow:

. . . the sun's accompanying shadow
Like a vampire's wing, the stillness in dead feet-- . . .³⁹

Thus in "Logos" the upward movement of the birds and the thrust-
ing growth of natural phenomena is precipitated by a sun that
". . . burns . . ." ⁴⁰ The soaring falcon and the angry hawk
in "Divine Image" and "Beutel's Name Is Inscribed For Eternal
Life" fly towards the sun at the expense of the victims. In

³⁸"Chokecherries," p. 23.

³⁹"Whatever Else Poetry is Freedom," p. 316.

⁴⁰"Logos," p. 286.

"Chokecherries" and "Red Chokecherries" the sun destroys the fruits it has nurtured to perfection.⁴¹

The universe exists beyond good and evil. Devoid of morality and of emotion, the flaming process is, nothing more and nothing less. Divinity and beauty exist in that which is in harmony with the universal flux:

Sun-purpled, the clover
kissing the outermost strand
was pure camouflage, as were
the innumerable grasses,
dogrose, timothy, vetch.

Nature's geometry, the exact design.
With what grace so ominous
a contraption held the beauty
of the dying day, the fly-
dying with faint and futile buzz.⁴²

Continually changing, evolving, growing and dying, the universal process flames, consuming and transforming in fertile abundance, holding all opposition in dynamic interaction, abiding by the Nietzschean premise that ". . . everything that is generated must be prepared to face its painful dissolution . . . because of the constant proliferation of forms pushing into life, because of the extravagant fecundity of the world will . . ." ⁴³ The ". . . brave leopards, . . . / With tongues of flame . . ." ⁴⁴ the chipmunks, ⁴⁵ the

⁴¹"Chokecherries," p. 23. "Red Chokecherries," p. 85.

⁴²"Arachnid," p. 117.

⁴³Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, trans. W. Golfing (New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1956), pp. 102-03.

⁴⁴"The Perverse Gulls," p. 80.

⁴⁵"My Flesh Comfortless," p. 370.

green fires in the grass,⁴⁶ the burning lake,⁴⁷ flaring stars,⁴⁸
 blazing garden,⁴⁹ the oaks ". . . the proud flame of life/
 passed through them . . .,"⁵⁰ the trees, ". . . In death's
 flaring athanor . . .,"⁵¹ are the manifold facets of an all
 encompassing universal combustion, manifestations of ". . .
 the fire-lands. . .,"⁵² that exist as a process of energy,
 rhythm, change and tension. Presiding over all is the sun,
 flame omnipotent, that nourishes and destroys in unending,
 amoral effulgence.

46 "Love The Conqueror Worm," p. 83.

47 "The Poet Entertains Several Ladies," p. 140

48 "Me, The P.M., And The Stars," p. 146.

49 "Undine," p. 183.

50 "Zoroastrian," p. 308.

51 "Autumn Lines For My Son." p. 354.

52 "Excursion," p. 10.

The Burning Cosmos - A Vision of Reality.

11) The Microcosm.

Man is portrayed as a microcosm of the universal process.
Layton expresses this concept of man as flame in "To A Very
Old Woman:"¹

Old Woman, your face is a halo of praise
That excludes nothing, not even Death;
I have looked upon your waxy and virginal torso
And I see you now as a frail candle
Whose flame, the initial sputter of ignition over,
Burns gently and with composure.

So the first taste of death was bitter.
Now you burn with a composed glow
Listening, half-amused like a superior person,
To your bridegroom which is the Darkness
While each hour of your lovely embrace
Descends in ecstatic beads of silence.

Old woman,
What does he say, your bridegroom?

That his child, Death, grows in my womb.

What else, old woman?

That only my white and virginal skin,
Seals off the darkness from the death within.

Old woman, with face ageless like snow,
What will you do now?

Flame serenely
Till like a warmed candle
I curve over
The arm of my hurrying bridegroom and lover.

Is that all, old woman?

¹"To A Very Old Woman," p. 56. Underlining indicates italics in text.

Yes...
No. When Death and Darkness embrace
Over me
I shall have no face
I shall be utterly gone.
Use the blackened wick
For a headstone. 2

The poet portrays life as a burning candle and captures the steady and even ebb of life as, tragically, man by his very living and flaming consumes himself away. Man's grasp upon life is tenuous. The images of the frail candle curving over the arm of death, and the white and virginal skin of the old woman with face ageless as snow, emphasise the transience of human existence in contrast to Death. The light/white-dark imagery sustains this idea, portraying the fragility of the candle's flame set amidst the vast Darkness.

The dichotomy of the candle (wax and wick), and flame, intimates the duality of man's existence. Physically, he lives within the linear duration of time; his "wax" is limited to the brief period that he exists within the universe. But man has the capacity to overcome his finitude, inasmuch as his flaming and living is linked with the cyclical, unending combustion of the cosmic flame. Layton expresses this concept of flame as mansoul in "The Benediction:"

Souls are the candleflames'
 blue centre
 burning stilly; . . . 3

²Ibid.

³"The Benediction," LLM, p. 28.

The soul is a point of unity within the opposition and tension of life, just as the universal flame is a point of fusion for all flux and change. The blue-white centre of the flame is the stillest point and will be used in Layton's poetry to represent vision. This point of fusion is expressed as silence in "To A Very Old Woman," and "The Benediction."

So the first taste of death was bitter.
 Now you burn with a composed glow
 Listening, half-amused like a superior person,
 To your bridegroom which is the Darkness
 While each hour of your lovely embrace
 Descends in ecstatic beads of silence.
 ("To A Very Old Woman.")⁴

The Sabbath candles
 my mother blesses
 burn brightly

The flames dance
 like little old men,
 their visages
 crumpled up with joy

To what music?
 Or is it the silence
 my mother

 has just shut the door on?
 ("The Benediction.")⁵

Man cannot live entirely physically or spiritually, for to do so would negate a vital part of his existence. Exemplifying the dual character of flame, that at once expresses motion and repose, his life is an interaction of wax and flame, light and dark, living and dying, incorporating the motion and joyousness of the old men, and the stillness and serenity of the old woman.

⁴"To A Very Old Woman," p. 56.

⁵"The Benediction," LLM, p. 28.

In "To A Very Old Woman" existence is described as opposition, and the flame of the candle is shown as a brief, but intense act of defiance. Man, like a frail candle flame, holds away death for a short time, flaming and glowing in the dark. Tragically, he is consumed by his own effort; by living he creates his own death. For a moment he may transform the darkness--his freedom, is to choose the intensity of his flaming. This image of the flame of life flowing through man to illuminate for one short instant the void of death, is similar to Layton's portrayal of trees and their brave affirmation of life:

Look at the skeletons
of those oaks:
the proud flame of life
passed through them . . .⁶

The blackened wick, the skeleton trees are both relics of a defiant life. Death is portrayed as static in contrast to the living flame that ". . . like a painting by Picasso . . ." draws ". . ." energy from its own contours . . ."

Those who respond generously and positively to life embody the characteristics of their own implicit flame-like qualities. Such people are often portrayed by the imagery of fire in Layton's poems. For instance in "Homage to Onassis" he writes of his ". . . Renaissance boldness and blaze/ Of your strong life . . ."⁸ In "Elegy For Marilyn Monroe" he says:

⁶"Zoroastrian." p. 308.

⁷"Joseph K-," p. 213.

⁸"Homage to Onassis," p. 546.

Good-bye Marilyn
 Sleep, sleep peacefully tonight
 One poet at least will remember,
 your brightness,
 the unique fever in your form and face
 (O insuperable filament, now black, now ash!)
 and love you always.⁹

Of Louise he writes:

She came to us recommended
 By the golden minutes and by nothing else;
 Her skin glowed, sang with the compliments
 Which these same minutes paid her.

Her hair burned like a yellow fire
 To celebrate the strange beauty of her face;
 Herself, she walked unconscious
 Of the need she started in us to praise, admire.¹⁰

In Lovers and Lesser Men the poet writes of an old woman,
 Stella Ioannou, who ". . . Rather than leave her village and
 enter a Home for the Aged in Mitylene . . . ended her life by
 putting fire to herself, thus dying as she had lived . . . ;"¹¹

Old and dying, she waited till I had writ my poem for her;
 Then, proudly, as if her life had been one long journey
 to this hour
 Changed the storied face that had betrayed her into
 glowing fire.¹²

Not everyone is portrayed by the imagery of fire in Layton's
 poems, for although all men inherit an innate, organic quality
 of flame, only a few strong and passionate individuals respond
 to it. The flaming serenity of the old woman, the proud fieri-
 ness of Stella Ioannou, ". . . iconoclast and rebel . . . ;"¹³

⁹"Elegy For Marilyn Monroe," p. 230.

¹⁰"For Louise, Age 17," p. 164.

¹¹"Stella Ioannou. (1894-1972)," LLM, p. 18.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

the bold life of Onassis, the vitality of Marilyn Monroe, and the beauty of Louise, these are some of the responses of a brave few who have embraced the antinomial tension of existence, consuming themselves by an exuberant affirmation of life.

Perhaps Layton's portrayal of "The Dancers" most completely sums up this concept of man as a microcosm of the universal flame:

Through envy
Of the propulsive movement
Of your hips
You have swept
All other dancers
From the centre
Of the naked ballroom;
The glass fluted table
In the feline shadows
And the white leopards
Applaud you under the pagan chandeliers;
Moreover you have made
A pie-eyed poet weep
From a loss of balance.

What more do you want or need,
My tuxedo'd Alpha,
My flaring red-dressed Omega,
Perfect, gifted with gracefulness,¹⁴
Your genitals moist with dancing?

These cosmic dancers, having swept all other dancers from the naked ballroom, become symbols of the universal flame, that incorporates the beginning and end of all flux. The ballroom represents a microcosm of the universe, ruled and ordered by the sun-like chandelier. It is a pagan world of unleashed passion and intensity. Through their dancing, the partners exhibit man's innate nature as flame; Alpha and Omega, they are at once unified, yet defined by their movements. In this expression of rhythm, they are in touch with the source of all existence, embodying the flaming process of the universe.

¹⁴"The Dancers," p. 145.

The Burning Cosmos - A Vision of Reality

iii) The Interaction of the Macrocosm
and the Microcosm.

The dancers of the previous chapter interact with the cosmic flame; through their movements, they explicitly enact the implicit rhythm of the universe.

What more do you want or need,
My tuxedo'd Alpha, . . . 1
My flaring red-dressed Omega . . .

Layton asks of them, for they have accepted dynamically and creatively their innate nature, and understood themselves to be a part of the universal process of energy, rhythm, change and tension. Rather than conserving their "wax" they have freely chosen to flame intensely, and consume themselves away by a bold and passionate embrace of life.²

Man, as a microcosm of the cosmic flame, cannot escape the tragedy of flux, nor the antinomial tension embodied in the concept of fire. ". . . Life is horrifying . . .,"³

Layton writes in "Seven O'Clock Lecture:"⁴

¹"The Dancers," p. 145.

²This concept intonates W.B. Yeats:

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away . . .
. . . and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.
("Sailing to Byzantium.")

W.B. Yeats, Selected Poetry, ed. A. Norman Jeffares
(London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 104

³"Seven O'Clock Lecture," p. 110.

⁴Ibid.

Filling their ears
 With the immortal claptrap of poetry,
 These singular lies with the power
 to get themselves believed,
 The permanent bloom on all time-infected things;
 Indicating the will to falsehood in the hearts of men,
 The music in a pismire's walk, the necessary glory of dung,
 immortal coal of the universe,
 Leibniz's mirroring monads, daybeams of consciousness

I see their heads sway at the seven o'clock lecture;
 I imagine they forget the hungers, the desperate fears
 in the hollow parts of their bodies,
 The physiological smells, the sardine cans, the flitch
 of bacon,
 The chicken bones gathered neatly
 to one side of the plate;
 Life is horrifying, said Cézanne,

but this is not
 what he meant who picked flowers blooming
 in the slaughterhouse; he meant the slit throats,
 The bear traps smeared with blood, the iron goads,
 the frightened
 servant-girl's Caesarian,
 And this planet dancing about Apollo,
 the blood drying and shining in the sun,
 Turning to Titians, beauty, the Arts . . .⁵

The ". . . music in a pismire's walk . . ."⁶ ". . . the
 necessary glory of dung . . ."⁷ are part of the antinomial
 tension of the universe. Suffering, sorrow, loss and death,
 are antecedent to ". . . Titians, beauty, the Arts . . ."⁸

Due to the eternal blaze of the universal process which ren-
 ders change to be a necessary mode of existence, and due also
 to the dialectics of reality, death is a natural process of
 transformation, and an essential condition of life. The
 ". . . permanent bloom on all time-infected things . . ."⁹

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

is a continuum of the ". . . immortal coal of the universe
... .."¹⁰ As a microcosm of the universal process, man carries
this permanent bloom through life towards death. He is subject
to the laws of the flame, and with the planet he revolves
around the catalytic sun. Like the chokecherries he is
". . . time-infected . . .,"¹¹ and vulnerable to the sun's
beneficial and destructive effulgence. The flame therefore,
exists as an enigmatic and ambiguous presence, representing
man's greatest gift and his most powerful and potent destroyer,
for the energy, rhythm, change and tension of the universal
process simultaneously create and annihilate him. Amoral,
nature sweeps him into its fecundity, and man must comply with
the flaming nature of existence. His freedom lies in his
creative acceptance of the cosmic combustion, and his dynamic
affirmation of himself as a microcosm of the cosmic flame.
Man must flame, but he may choose the intensity of his flaming.

It's all in the manner of the done

Manner redeemeth everything:

redeemeth

man, sets him up among,

over, the other worms, puts

a crown on him, yes, size of a

mountain lake,

dazzling more dazzling!

than a slice of sun¹²

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²"It's All In The Manner," p. 100.

Layton believes that man must embrace life passionately and totally:

"Affirm life," I said, "affirm
The triumphant grass that covers the worm;
And the flesh, the swinging flesh
That burns on its stick of bone."¹³

Any attempt by man, caught within the finite bounds of his reason, to encompass the polarities symbolized by fire, results in crucifixion and dismemberment upon the dialectics of existence. Despite this, he cannot ignore the contraries, because they constitute the essence of life itself. Caught up in the overwhelming implications of the cosmic flame, he must live dangerously, and respond with joy to his tragic situation. He cannot, however, capture existence, for the eternal blaze is flux, and only death is static. To grasp the flame would burn and destroy him. Rather, he must evolve in harmony with the universal process, experiencing every aspect of the universe in a continual metamorphosis.

Layton does not conceive life to be solely a brave, but hopeless dance. In the Foreword to The Collected Poems he reminisces on a childhood experience with a broomstick; this experience is an analogy to his belief of man's interaction with the cosmic flame:

When I was six my family lived in a crowded rectangular box that was divided into four tiny compartments . . . above us the semi-brothel run by a husband-and-wife team filled up each night with roistering drunks whose screams, shouts, laughter and imprecations rained down like invisible hailstones on the immigrant family below, making sleep impossible . . .

¹³"The Swinging Flesh," p. 101.

Now my mother, her mournful whispers joined by those of her daughters and cousin Fanny, would beg me to get the broom, and thump its handle into the ceiling . . .

Broomstick tightly clutched in my hand I'd perch myself unsteadily on the dresser and make precarious upward sweeps with it, only the dull wooden sound I heard in the darkness telling me I'd found my wide target.

It was then a miracle took place. The loud cursings and clatterings would stop suddenly, and silence like some mysterious night flower would blossom from the tip of my broomstick. I sensed it spreading out with swift amazing luxuriance until it filled the whole bedroom. . . .

Of course in less than fifteen minutes the noise, the tumult, would start up again, requiring another grumbling application of the broomstick. Yet each time the mysterious flower of silence opened its invisible blossoms over my head I felt the same thrill of power, of exulting joy. The cold, the freezings and the shiverings were forgotten, obliterated. I, I alone, had punched a rectangular space of quiet into the filthy drunken chaos and presented it to those older and stronger than myself.¹⁴

This memory exemplifies the poet's belief of a life passionately lived. For a brief moment he may manipulate the ". . . mysterious flower of silence . . ." ¹⁵ and experience the ". . . thrill of power, of exulting joy . . ." ¹⁶ Because nothing is static, except death, ". . . the screams, shouts, laughter, and imprecations . . ." ¹⁷ return. Both the silence and the tumult occur throughout life, because of the dualistic

¹⁴ Foreword to The Collected Poems of Irving Layton, no page.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

character of the flame that establishes a rhythm of motion and repose forever and eternally recurring. Despite man's entrapment within the amoral fecundity of nature, he may through personal endeavour give significance to nature with ". . . precarious sweeps . . ." ¹⁸ Life may knock him on the head and make him ". . . ring like a tuning fork . . ." ¹⁹ but he in turn can invent the particular note when struck. Nature needs man as much as man needs nature, for the macrocosm and the microcosm are implicitly entwined.

In "The Fertile Muck" Layton pronounces his vision of man and nature:

There are brightest apples on those trees
but until I, fabulist, have spoken
they do not know their significance . . . ²⁰

Despite his temporality, man may create and invent nature / simultaneously whilst nature creates him. Thus he is both the victor and the victim of "Divine Image" and "Beutel's Name Is Inscribed For Eternal Life." Again and again the poet returns to the theme of man's position as victor and victim. "How to dominate reality?" ²¹ he asks in "The Fertile Muck"; ". . . Love is one way; / imagination another. . . ." ²²

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "The Fertile Muck," p. 28.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Since the flame is his central symbol to express his vision of reality, the poems that examine man's peculiar relationship with nature, abound with fire. There is no final resolution and no chronology. Early in his career, Layton examined the problem of man as a microcosmic flame amidst the macrocosmic combustion of the universe. Motion will always resolve itself into stillness, only to fall back into its antithesis. Reality can never be grasped for all is flux and proliferating fecundity.

Man must accept his flame-like characteristics, and respond with joy to his tragic fate. Through the intensity of his life, he may, like the dancers, consume himself away, and exhibit his freedom, to flame intensely and creatively. He may become " . . . fabulist . . ." ²³ by giving significance to nature through love and imagination. Through this response he attains the power of victor, forever capitulating to his time-infected nature of victim.

²³Ibid.

Chapter II.

Poems of Contemplation.

In Chapter I, Layton's vision of reality is characterised by a landscape that reverberates with fire,¹ for the fecundity of nature exemplifies the traits of the universal flame. In his search for a viable mode of existence within this blaze of opposition and tension Layton withdraws into the heart of nature and places himself in close proximity to that which typifies the energy of the logos. In this environment the poet attempts to mingle with the rhythm of the flame in an attitude of poverty, expectation, and humility. In "My Flesh Comfortless,"² "If I Lie Still,"³ and "Metamorphosis,"⁴ the poet, in solitude, watches the universal process that exemplifies the flaming universe. In "New Tables"⁵ he identifies with the ". . . bare trees in late April . . ."⁶ that wait patiently ". . . for the gift of leaves . . ."⁷ This image

¹Layton is using Pythagorean logic here--"The universe is a kosmos, and philosophy is a necessity because only by understanding the order of the macrocosm can man hope to imitate it and implant a similar order in the microcosm, becoming kosmios, or orderly in his soul.

W.K.C. Guthrie, The Greeks and Their Gods (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 198.

²"My Flesh Comfortless," p. 370.

³"If I Lie Still," p. 248.

⁴"Metamorphosis," p. 167.

⁵"New Tables," p. 326.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

is sustained in "If I Lie Still." In "For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation On Flies And Kings,"⁸ and "A Tall Man Executes A Jig,"⁹ the poet emphatically denies the social milieu of ritual and dogma and through the example of nature's process, reaches an understanding by which he may redeem himself as victor, despite his temporal and tragic limitations. Throughout all these poems the sun exists as the pivotal point of vision, for it illustrates the manner by which man may live, and stands as a metaphor ". . . for human nature fundamentally bountiful, creative, with potential that has never yet been fully realised . . ." ¹⁰

"My Flesh Comfortless" is a poem concerning Layton's desire to enter into vision. By careful documentation of the surroundings, the poet verifies and reasserts his conception of the universe as flame:

My flesh comfortless with insect bites, sweat,
I lie stretched out on my couch of grass;
Chipmunks break like flames from the bleak earth.

And the sun's golden scarabs on the surface
Are aimless, nameless, scintillant;
Unmoving, or darting into pools

Of dark, their brightness gone, But the frog sits
And stares at my writing hand, his eyes
A guttersnipe's, leering. Or lecherous

⁸"For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation on Flies and Kings," p. 438.

⁹"A Tall Man Executes A Jig," p. 383.

¹⁰Eli Mandel in a discussion with Irving Layton in an article entitled "Nietzsche and Poetry: A Discussion," The Malahat Review, No. 24 (October 1972), 24-25.

As though an underworld savvy swelled
 Those heavy-lidded eyes, xanthic beads,
 They're desolation's self-mockery..

Its golden silence! . . . 11

The chipmunks and the golden scarabs typify the endless flux of the universe. These flame-like animals and insects breaking from a bleak earth and darting into pools of dark emphasise the dialectics of tension as the poet manipulates the polarities of movement and stillness, light and dark, fire and water, within the poem. The image is sustained by the vitality of the oscillating landscape in contrast to the ". . . heavy-lidded . . ." ¹² eyes of the frog whose ". . . underworld savvy . . ." ¹³ and staring ". . . xanthic beads . . ." ¹⁴ are defined against the nameless, scintillant golden scarabs ". . . on the surface . . ." ¹⁵ The frog's solid immobility acts as a measure to the poet who is comfortless ". . . with insect bites, sweat . . ." ¹⁶ The landscape of the poem acts as a microcosmic glimpse into the whole process of universal flux, with the frog's eyes representing the still centre of the

¹¹ "My Flesh Comfortless," p. 370.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

flame. Amidst this flame-like setting the poet lies, stretched out in an attitude of hope and expectation. He writes, he cries to love, through all modes he strives to reach wisdom. The poem ends with an appeal for vision and identification with the sun.

A cry heard and unheard, merest bubble
Under the legs of fallow beetles?
O, Love, enclose me in your cold bead

O lift me like a vine-leaf on the vine;
In community of soil and sun
Let me not taste this desolation

But hear roar and pour of waters unseen
In mountains that parallel my road--
Sun vaulting gold against their brightest green!¹⁷

In "If I Lie Still"¹⁸ Layton finds the vision to which he has appealed in "My Flesh Comfortless." The search for community and the many questions evident in "My Flesh Comfortless" are replaced in "If I Lie Still" by quiet certitude and fulfillment. Placing himself once more in the midst of nature, the poet enters into fire and abides at the centre of the existential moment, the still point of the fluctuating flame. It is a vision that transcends words and sounds, a vision that supercedes the limited capacities of man's busy, everyday life and projects him into eternity.

If I lie still
the light from the leaves
will drop on my hands and knees

Fire will envelop me
yet I won't burn

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸"If I Lie Still," p. 248.

I shall hear the silence plainly
while the stream flows into my veins
and out again

Small wild animals will no longer fear me,
but bring their young
to tickle my heels;
nuzzle in my armpits

I shall know love without disquiet
--without passion

For a thousand years
I shall lie like this
with my head toward the sun

Till knowledge and power
have become one;
then I shall write a single verse,
achieve one flawless deed

Then lie down again
to become like this shallow
stone under my hand,
and let my face
be covered with grass

To be pulled out by the roots
by what raging hermit,
his breast torn apart as mine now?¹⁹

The moment of unity is essentially transcendent, lifting the poet above time, above space, and above tragedy. In an image of flame, the poet becomes the catalytic principle that transforms existence, rendering time into eternity, tragedy into joy, for one brief but eternal moment. Love and imagination coalesce into power, power to overcome mortality and to create a single verse, a flawless deed. Through the intensity of his vision, the poet achieves a timeless state. He becomes a sundial in which he is his own pointer, for he has overcome

¹⁹Ibid.

finitude with wisdom. The essence of life however, is tension and opposition, strife and flux; the pointer of his sundial must cast a shadow. Such ecstasy is necessarily brief and cannot be sustained for it is a deathlike state akin to the static image of the blackened wick in "To A Very Old Woman."

"If I Lie Still" was published relatively late in Layton's career. Other poems contain evidence of the germinal idea, portrayed by overt images that have been internalised and subdued in this vision. The peace and tranquillity that abides at the centre of the flame is described in "Release."

Then will my soul aspire beyond the flesh
To tread bold ways to a remembered peace
And find life's blasting fever ebb and cease
In spacious realms where light is born afresh;
And no more marvel how our sullen mirth
Provokes the ancient anger of the earth.²⁰

The still point of vision, achieved through unification with the cosmic flame, is portrayed in "New Tables:"

I feel an emotion no saint, no, nor mystic
Ever felt before me at this arrangement of sudden glory;
Perhaps the humble grasses in the fields
Understand this whitest ecstasy,
And the bare trees in late April
Waiting patiently for their gift of leaves²¹

In the same poem, Layton reiterates the ineffability of wisdom:

At such moments, poor and powerless,
I am so full of blessing I think I could babble
The meaningless religious words, the formulas of
contrition,
The bewildered ghost-sounds, ghost-meanings of old
men;²²

²⁰ "Release," p. 93.

²¹ "New Tables," p. 326.

²² Ibid.

and portrays himself in a state of vision through a submerged image of fire:

An atheist, shivering with blessed ecstasy.²³

In "Metamorphosis"²⁴ contemplation upon the defiant growth of flowers, grasses and trees, projects the poet into an eternal moment similar to that described in "If I Lie Still." It is a moment of supreme joy, in which the incoherent, rhythmic babble of "New Tables" is reiterated anew as ". . . singing pleasure . . ."²⁵

In "New Tables"²⁶ Layton intimates that wisdom is existential; the ". . . prodigal centuries . . ."²⁷ are ". . . white ashes . . ."²⁸ ". . . Like the streaming hairs of frenzied anchorites, / The yea-sayers of hammered conviction . . ."²⁹ Life requires participation, vision is a burning flame, in which all the agony of ecstasy must be endured. Although "If I Lie Still" expresses Layton's conception of wisdom, it is gained through withdrawal, and the poet, hermit-like, achieves a peace and unity whereby he becomes undifferentiated.

²³Ibid.

²⁴"Metamorphosis," p. 167.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶"New Tables," p. 326.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

and immersed within the universal process. Such unity is deathlike and static, for it lifts him out of the antinomial tension of existence that is essential to life. The poet must return to the flux and change of the universe. Existential involvement in Laytonian terms is superior to transcendence since it does not negate life but affirms the suffering inherent in the flame.

In "For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation On Flies And Kings"³⁰ Layton employs suffering as a source of joy, and understands man's role to be similar to the Nietzschean concept of the Übermensch. Thus he reaches a genuine resolution of tension and opposition within the fiery process of existence. This affirmation of courageous and joyful suffering, of tumult and of ecstasy is a state of Joyful Wisdom. Layton rejects society's dear enchantments, for ". . . their Christs and their legends . . ."³¹ have taught man to be weak, pitiful, and compassionate in the face of suffering. Layton writes: ". . . It's not only that you don't find the superman entering into this realm of suffering . . ." (i.e. Christian) ". . . but that he doesn't want to--he rejects it . . ."³² The poet's conception of suffering is ". . . the assertion of creativity, and therefore of strength and of . . . will to power . . . an overwhelming exuberance and effulgence like that of the sun. . ."³³

³⁰"For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation on Flies and Kings," p. 438.

³¹Ibid., Underlining mine.

³²"Nietzsche and Poetry: A Discussion," p. 24.

³³Ibid.

The poet's search leads away from the comfort of enchantments into the very heart of tragedy; from this he will wrest a victory over fate. Once more we find withdrawal and poverty as antecedent to mystery:

On this remote and classic lake
 Only the lapsing of the water can I hear
 And the cold wind through the sumac.
 The moneyed and their sunburnt children
 Swarm other shores. Here is ecstasy,
 The sun's outline made lucid
 By each lacustral cloud
 And man naked with mystery. . . . 34

Surrounded by the flame-like sumac, Layton listens to the cold wind of change and realises that domination of reality is ". . . all in the manner of the done . . ." 35 The vision of the sun as the epitome of flame, eternally becoming in extravagant abandon is emphasised by the lacustral clouds. All at once the nature of opposition is revealed as a means by which man may realise and affirm existence. This is the centre of mystery; the vision overflows into a dynamic acceptance of creative suffering as man's victory over an inevitable fate:

They dance best who dance with desire,
 Who lifting feet of fire from fire
 Weave before they lie down
 A red carpet for the sun. 36

The red carpet of man's life is woven from violence and pain, but it is this pain that spurs man on to overcome himself in

34 "For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation On Flies And Kings," p. 438.

35 "It's All In The Manner," p. 100.

36 "For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation On Flies And Kings," p. 438.

fellowship with the sun; it makes him a king worthy to dance beneath the Lord of life. Pain and suffering, joy and happiness, are necessary to the creative process of weaving and dancing. The polarities of existence enable man to create, to perceive, and to define through opposition. Affirmation involves the polarities of self and reality; it is not the deathlike immersion into undifferentiated essence recorded in "If I Lie Still." In "For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation On Flies And Kings" Layton affirms life by dancing in time with the universal process, at once unified and defined through the act of creativity.

In this poem Layton recaptures the image of "The Dancers."³⁷ The act of dancing is an overt and explicit movement that resembles the implicit flame-like characteristics of the universal process. It is essentially a creative act, and thus the poet, in the movement of dance, at once capitulates to his bondage as a time-infected creature, yet nevertheless by a ". . . Dionysian assertion of creativity . . ."³⁸ redeems himself and wrests a victory from his tragic fate.

Such outpouring of joy requires tremendous courage as man enters the tragic forest of existence;

Enter this tragic forest where the trees
 Uprear as if for the graves of men,
 All function and desire to offend
 With themselves finally done;

³⁷"The Dancers," p. 145.

³⁸"Nietzsche and Poetry: A Discussion," p. 23.

And mark the dark pines farther on,
 The sun's fires touching them at will,
 Motionless like silent khans
 Mourning serene and terrible
 Their Lord entombed in the blazing hill.³⁹

The dark pine's courage, their motionless affirmation of fate, provide an example to the poet. The movement of the dance and the motionless acceptance of recurring pain are all a continuum. Man must dance and sway in rhythm with the flame, forever keeping the still centre of his soul strong and enduring in the face of adversity. Layton becomes binary, involved in the manifest world of duality, yet keeping in sight the unity of the undifferentiated state of existence within the still point of the flame. "If I Lie Still" Layton writes, "... Fire will envelop me/ yet I won't burn . . .,"⁴⁰ but:

They dance best who dance with desire,
 Who lifting feet of fire from fire
 Weave before they lie down
 A red carpet for the sun.⁴¹

Layton's contemplative poems culminate in "A Tall Man Executes A Jig,"⁴² which encompasses the still centre of "If I Lie Still" as well as the dancing, weaving, existential involvement of "For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation On Flies And Kings." In this poem Layton asserts the manner by which man

³⁹"For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation On Flies And Kings," p. 438.

⁴⁰"If I Lie Still," p. 248.

⁴¹"For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation On Flies And Kings," p. 438, underlining mine.

⁴²"A Tall Man Executes A Jig," p. 383.

may redeem himself. The still centre, and the unending flux of the flame are realised to be necessary continua of existence; man must weave in and out of the antinomies of motion and repose, turmoil and tranquility, in a never-ending interaction of self and reality.

Once more the poet places himself amidst a fecund nature and contemplates the inherent tension within the universe. Light is defined against shadow (" . . . And watched the shafts of light between the tufts . . .");⁴³ the sun's downward rays are equilibrated by the growing grass (" . . . And felt the sun push the grass towards him . . .");⁴⁴ the birds " . . . imprudent . . ."⁴⁵ whistlings pierce the " . . . hour's stillness . . .";⁴⁶ the turbulence of the small gnats is portrayed against the vastness of the still sky; as they tilt against the wind they exemplify the tension of flux. The creative/destructive dichotomy of nature is emphasised in the lines:

Fruitflies he'd call them except there was no fruit
About, spoiling to hatch those glitterings . . .⁴⁷

The amoral nature of the universe is described by the image of the bored and playful hand:

Jig jig, jig jig. Like minuscule black links
Of a chain played with by some playful
Unapparent hand or the palpitant
Summer haze bored with the hour's stillness. . . .⁴⁸

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The first lines of "A Tall Man Executes A Jig" are a masterful, poetic rendering of the universal flux that incorporates all antinomies in a never-ending process of life and death. Amidst this proliferation the "tall man" on his blanket, is defined by his contemplative and watchful immobility.

Through the flaming phenomena of nature the "tall man" understands himself to be a minuscule part of the eternal blaze. Thus he too is drawn into the fecundity of nature until he is ". . . a maddened speck . . ." ⁴⁹ among the gnat's unrest. But man has the capacity to reason and create. By his manner he may emulate the monarchal effulgence of the sun, and become strong and exuberant despite the inherent tragedy of his time-infected nature. Contemplation of the universal process brings not only an understanding of man's affinity with the flame, it also leads the "tall man" into a creative affirmation of his own innate flame-like qualities. Like the gnats that leave their ". . . orthodox unrest . . ." ⁵⁰ their ". . . undulant excitation . . ." ⁵¹ the "tall man" can be at once part of the universal process, yet defined from it through his own inventiveness. Thus he can create nature simultaneously as it creates him. Elsewhere Layton writes: ". . . Each day the world must be created anew . . . those poets who sing of ecstasy, courage, freedom, create meaning out of meaninglessness

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

even as the lute-player makes music out of the empty air
 around him⁵² As soon as the "tall man" gives meaning
 to nature (" . . . until he saw purest joy/ In their frantic
 jiggings under a hair"),⁵³ he becomes the creator and
 thus can rise enormous and visualise himself in various images
 of control. As artist, (Donatello), philosopher, (Plato),
 and lover, he exemplifies the domination inherent in the
 creative potential of man, and

. . . feels his forehead touch the emptied sky
 Where all antinomies flood into light⁵⁴

In this act of creativity he has momentarily controlled the
 antinomies of the flame and become sunlike. Thus the "tall
 man" ". . . executes a jig" ⁵⁵ he dances and he does not
 dance, at once dominating the oppositions of life. Layton
 emphasises that the universe does not change, since it exists
 "forever and eternally recurring. Juxtaposed to the image of
 the "tall man", powerful and omnipotent in his creative vision
 of unity, the gnats continue their turbulent motion, exemplify-
 ing the nature of the universe:

Yet jig jig jig, the haloing black jots
 Meshed with the wheeling fire of the sun;
 Notion 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
⁵⁶

⁵² Irving Layton, Engagements, ed. Seymour Mayne (Toronto:
 McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1972), pp. 81-82. Originally
 published in A Laughter in the Mind, 2nd edition (Montreal:
 Editions d'Orphée, 1959).

⁵³ "A Tall Man Executes a Jig," p. 383.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Such creative vision of antinomial resolve is brief, since everything must fall back into its antithesis:

He doffed his aureole of gnats and moved,
Out of the field as the sun sank down . . . 57

Having reached an understanding of his own dualistic qualities of flame, motion and repose, finite and infinite, victor and victim, creator and created, king and servant, godlike and time-infected, the poet perceives that such a vision is incompatible with the social enchantments of ritual and dogma. The death of the snake exemplifies the manner in which the "tall man" must live and die. Convulsing, dragging into the dark, cursing, mocking and screaming, the defiant snake reveals the manner by which man may dominate reality. Adamant and fierce, the "tall man" stretches out in fellowship of death, and in a primordial vision, that transcends time, he experiences the brave and tenacious behaviour of animals:

Backwards to caves, mounds, and sunken ledges
And desolate cliffs where come only kites,
And where of perished badgers and racoons
The claws alone remain, gripping the earth. 58

Man too must grip the earth, despite the desolation and overwhelming savagery of nature. Lover, philosopher, and artist, all must be warriors, and emulate the snake. . . . Huge, his

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

mailed coat glittering with stars that made/ The night bright,
 and blowing thin wreaths of cloud/ Athwart the moon . . . "59
 Only through such courage and determination may the "tall man"
 stand up " . . . transforming all . . . "60 in a manner akin to
 the metamorphic sun. Like the snake, the warrior-artist-hero
 may make the night bright; by his own creativity he may flame
 amidst the darkness, like the candle image of the old woman,
 creating his own " . . . garlands . . . "61 (" . . . wreaths of
 cloud . . . "), 62 through his own peculiar, and unique ability
 to invent and transform reality.

.59 Ibid. Whereas Layton's conception of fire as the rhythmic
 symbol of eternal combustion is derived from Heraclitean philo-
 sophy, his use of sun imagery to signify personal apotheosis is
 more closely associated with Nietzsche. Noontide symbolizes
 for both writers, (Layton and Nietzsche), the point of fusion
 and identification with the sun, when all opposition may be held
 in a continuum, an aesthetic pattern of interpenetration and
 interdependence.

In Layton's poetry the star is synonymous with the sun; this
 is associated with Nietzsche's use of the star/sun imagery:

"When Zarathustra was thirty years old, he left his home
 and the lake of his home, and went into the mountains . . .
 rising one morning with the rosy dawn, he went before the sun,
 and spake thus unto it:

Thou great star! What would be thy happiness if thou hadst
 not those for whom thou shinest!

(Thus Spake Zarathustra, p. 3.)

"Thou great star," spake he, as he had spoken once before,
 "thou deep eye of happiness, what would be all thy happiness
 if thou hadst not those for whom thou shinest!"

(Thus Spake Zarathustra, p. 398.)

60 "A Tall Man Executes a Jig," p. 383.

61 "The Fertile Muck," p. 28.

62 "A Tall Man Executes A Jig," p. 383.

Chapter III.Love

The experience of love leads Layton into a direct confrontation with the dichotomies of existence. This may be seen in his imagery--fire symbolizes the male principle, water symbolises the female principle. Eli Mandel has documented this:

Water is "the female element," explicitly identified as such, and its sexual role defined, in the poem "Thoughts in the Water." It becomes the goddess "Undine" in the poem of that title, (again with sexual implications), and is both the Eden and Eve of the marriage celebrated in "Sacrament by the Water."

. . . The male sun, "a phallus hung in the whitening sky," gathers to itself not only images of fire and light but of poetry itself. It is the poet who wears "at the heart a hairshirt of fire" and who "wrapped (his) thighs in a loincloth of bees"; as "living sun" it attends the "formal creature/ Of fiery flesh and bone" who declares

And only love is truly perfect, a fire still,
And though partial from excess of joy
nevertheless, like genius, irrefutable.

It is "a bloodsmear on broad catalpa leaves" where the poet of "The Cold Green Element" hangs, the "fictive eye" of the poet who is turning into "grave sage and hero," "like that Roman emperor/ who dying/ turned into a god"; Rembrandt's "bright eye" that, flung into space, becomes a sun; attending spirit of the poet who, in "The Fertile Muck," builds "crazy sundials." In "Death of Moishe Lazarovitch," it becomes the emblem of the poet's father, "a ring of bright light," "like a tall post that had caught the sun's ray"; and the poet's son, a "braggart, and thrasher" who commands the summer season, takes up in his "cock's querulous strut" the manner of the "sensual sun . . . mounted on a hill."¹

¹Eli Mandel, Canadian Writers and Their Works, Irving Layton (Toronto: Forum House Publishing Co., 1972), pp. 38-39.

Love as a union of male-fire and female-water is potentially destructive; fire evaporates water, water extinguishes fire. Once more man is caught in a tragic dilemma. The urge toward unity is deeply embedded in his psyche and thus he is bound by the frustration of his desire, knowing that his inmost urges destroy him and those whom he loves. This excruciating position is evident in his use of fire imagery to portray the ambiguities of passion; he writes; pleasure ". . . exploded in my brain . . .,"² ". . . Merely to touch you is fire/ In my head . . .,"³ ". . . her kisses/ that fell on my body live coals . . .,"⁴ ". . . I wore at the heart a hairshirt of fire . . .,"⁵ ". . . you moisten/ My parched nipples into a blazing garden . . .,"⁶ ". . . and you and I smoulder and burn . . .,"⁷ ". . . that lovely fire/ that flamed and flared in thighs and testicles . . .,"⁸ ". . . so great was the fire in my head . . .,"⁹ ". . . his curious fire loosening her limbs . . .,"¹⁰ It shows in the bewildered questions concerning

²"Mahogany Red," p. 402.

³"Divinity," p. 367.

⁴"Coal," p. 264.

⁵"By Ecstasies Perplexed," p. 206.

⁶"Undine," p. 183.

⁷"The Satyr," p. 166.

⁸"Fortuna et Cupidas," LLM, p. 10.

⁹"Farewell," LLM, p. 12.

¹⁰"Stella," LLM, p. 16.

his relationships with his wives;¹¹ it is revealed in the dichotomies of Hebrew love and pagan passion,¹² love and hate,¹³ delight and frustration,¹⁴ old age and youth.¹⁵ It is demonstrated in his interchanging Apollonian and Dionysian imagery where the ambivalence of love is enacted through a power play of form imposed upon energy.¹⁶ Lastly it is shown in poems where the imagery of fire and water dynamically interact in creation and destruction during the sexual act.¹⁷ Layton portrays this concept of love as an ambiguous and enigmatic experience in his introduction to an anthology of Canadian love poems:

I wanted to hear the unmistakable cry of rapture and suffering; I wanted to hear it clear and unmuffled. Love: adolescent or adulterous; tender or brutal; obscene, lustful, visionary or animal. Love: anarchic or responsible, sacramental or earthy; destroyer and preserver of conventional certainties, artifacts; paradox and riddle. Love, the one inhabiting with death, brings forth art. And the cry at that moment when love turns into contempt and hate, when going sour in the mouth it turns into discord, the desire to hurt and humiliate.

¹¹"Berry Picking," p. 315. "I Would For Your Sake Be Gentle," p. 161.

¹²"Song For A Late Hour," p. 30.

¹³"Coal," p. 264. "The Maddened Lover," p. 260. "I Would For Your Sake Be Gentle," p. 161.

¹⁴"Blue And Lovely, My Love," p. 281.

¹⁵"To The Girls Of My Graduating Class," p. 88.

¹⁶"Thoughts In The Water," p. 25. "Sacrament By The Water," p. 193.

¹⁷"Undine," p. 183.

I wanted to hear the love cry of men and women exposed and defenceless, all coverings tossed aside with disdain or dignity as ridiculous encumbrances. For the love cry is the most perplexing of all since it is the most truly human--bawdy, wanton, sacrificial, selfish, humbling, exalting, coarse, angelic--for it is the one cry that by its variety and meaningfulness abashes the gods themselves in their bland heavens and makes them envious of the turbulent sons and daughters of men.¹⁸

His poetic rendering of this statement is most clearly demonstrated in "By Ecstasies Perplexed." In this poignant poem the poet questions the pain and beauty of love, and associates this bewildering phenomena with the flame. Recalling a childhood drama when--

a flaxen haired boy five years old
 who one bad night put fire to his gown
 and watched the flames about him rise blue and gold¹⁹

the poet equates this moment to his present love relationship which has precipitated him into a similar predicament in which he is caught within the fascination of an experience that is both destructive and creative. The blue and gold flames of innocence and experience continue to blaze, and the poet is ". . . by sharp ecstasies perplexed . . ." Love is a paradox whereby innocence is consumed, resulting in the gain of experience. The rapture of love that brings illumination and the power of the saint, is equilibrated by the ambiguous nature of that experience; thus he is

¹⁸Irving Layton, Love Where the Nights are Long (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962), p. 16.

¹⁹"By Ecstasies Perplexed," p. 206.

. . . a saint streaked with foibles,
 I wore at the heart a hairshirt of fire,
 wrapped my thighs in a loincloth of bees 20

The personae of the suffering saint and the religious penitent underline the pain and ecstasy inherent in the sexual act; carnal and spiritual, the imagery captures the dualistic tension that man encounters as he faces the animalistic lust and visionary possibilities that abide within him. The poem abounds with references to the sharp and devastating effects of love--the thrust of foibles, the penitent hairshirt, the pain of fire, the sting of bees, the burnished baubles that have acquired their gaudy lustre by friction and attrition. The vitality and splendour of the love act is sadly defined against the cheaply furnished apartment and the arid bantam trees. The marvellous fecundity of nature that has been portrayed in other poems as a flaming universe, is diminished in this grave and pondering poem. Love ". . . surrender, concern, ecstasy . . . sweet torture . . .,"²¹ wanes to the exhaustion of lust, indignation, remorse and ". . . other troubles"²²

The paradox of love is clearly demonstrated in the poems that refer to those relationships that are most cherished; the lovers, all too often, exhibit the underlying tension and opposition that is inherent in the flaming principle of the universe:

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Irving Layton, Love Where the Nights are Long, p. 11.

²²"By Ecstasies Perplexed," p. 206.

I would for your sake be gentle
 Be, believe me, other than I am:
 What, what madness is it that hurls me
 Sundays against your Sunday calm?

True, there's enough gall in my ducts
 To cover an area, and more:
 But why you--free from evil, poor bird?
 Why you--my heart and saviour?

I swear I'm damned to so hate and rage.
 But your fair innocence is my guilt;
 And the stream that you make clear
 I must, to fog my image, fill with silt.

Bear with me, bear with me--
 Your goodness, gift so little understood
 Even by the angels I suppose
 And by us here somewhat undervalued.

Is what I hold to when madness comes.
 It is the soft night against which I flare
 Rocketwise, and when I fall
 See my way back by my own embers.²³

The poet's perverse temper is balanced by the calm serenity of his spouse. Together they embody the dual character of the flux and tension of the universe. But tragically, by acting in accordance with the flame, a friction is established that destroys the love that is between them.

Other tensions intrude into the lover's relationship. Time-infected creatures, they must cope with the realities of age. The wondrous blaze of youth, associated with the omnipotent sun, resolves itself into the smashed bulb of maturity:

²³"I Would For Your Sake Be Gentle," p. 161. l. 4 incorrect in The Collected Poems.

Once, pleasure expanded in my phallus
like a thin, excruciating column of mercury;
when it exploded in my brain,
it was like a movie I once saw
where the earth is grabbed by the sun
and fried black;

.....
Now, without any warning,
you are a middle-aged woman
who has tinted her hair mahogany red;

.....
The bulb in my brain
once ignited and kept aglow
by genital electricity
lies smashed to bits. . . . 24

Yet the fault does not always lie with the poet; the
loved one may betray him, for he has made himself vulnerable
through his act of surrender. In "Letter From A Straw Man"²⁵
the poet shows how his burning passion, fanned by the lover's
attention, is distributed to local society, who cheapen it
by their uncomprehending and indiscriminate use:

I loved you, Bobbo, even when you knuckled me
And pulled the straw out of my breast,
Pretending to weep yet secretly glad to note
How yellow and summer-dry the stuff was.

You will surely recall how amazed
We both were the straw was endless;
At the time I did not know it was your fingers
Made the straw grow there and blaze

Yellow in the fierce sunlight....How when
I once caught your cold blue eye
It first burned like sulphur, but affected
Let down a tear like a drop of dirty sea-water

.....
But why did you give great handfuls
To the visiting firemen? And when the mayor
Asked for some to decorate his fireplace,
Why did you not refuse? . . . 26

24 "Mahogany Red," p. 402.

25 "Letter From A Straw Man," p. 172.

26 Ibid.

Love, Layton asserts in the same poem, is precious and personal; a phenomenon that is carefully cultivated between two people. But, because it is an ". . . extreme statement of surrender . . . when the ego forgets its strategies of protection or retreat and men and women stand naked, revealed in all their clothless glory. . . ."27 the lover is vulnerable and may easily be destroyed.

This destruction through love is portrayed in "Blue And Lovely, My Love;"28 the lover who was ". . . false to everything/ including the snapshot of my grandmother"29 reduces the poet's blazing passion into bone and ash. Despite the total destruction, however, love is potentially redemptive. Grass grows from ". . . stilled desire and disdain"30 the butterflies previous death as caterpillars, has precipitated them into creatures of grace and flight. Love too, is potentially metamorphic; as the blue butterflies search for the dead poet, the anticipated resurrection is intimated by the tall grasses that grow ". . . as if they were my hands reaching for your face. . . ."31 The poet will die with each act of love, but that death will commence the metamorphosis that is an inherent part of the flaming cosmos.

27 Layton, Love Where the Nights are Long, p. 15.

28 "Blue and Lovely, My Love," p. 281.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

Three poems examine this process of death and rebirth--
 "Undine,"³² "Winter Light,"³³ and "I Know The Dark and Hovering
 Moth."³⁴ "Undine" opens with Layton's obvious delight in the
 lady; eroticism allows him a potential creativity intimated
 in his ". . . pregnant hands . . ."

Your body to hold, your perfect breasts.
 Your lips; your hips under my pregnant hands
 That when they move, why they're snakes
 Sliding, and hiding near your golden buttocks.

Then as your great engines of love begin
 Intestinal, furious, submarine
 They spark into small bites
 Whose hot spittle inundates all my deserts.

And I'm like water in a scoop of stone
 Kissed into absence by a drying sun;
 Or I'm dried Sahara sand
 Wanting your wetness over me without end.

So possessed, so broken's my entire self
 No rosy whiplash, love, can bind my halves
 When queen you squat: you moisten
 My parched nipples into a blazing garden.

And I your paramour-Paracelsus
 Fish a soul for you from between my loins;
 You shudder in my embrace
 And all your wetness takes the form of tears.³⁵

The self-assurance of the poet is quickly undermined, for his
 ". . . pregnant hands . . ." dissolve into a grammatical
 ambiguity. The poet's clear conception of himself as male-
 creator is lost in the moving hips of Undine. The woman of
 passion looms as a great engine of love, whose power is

³²"Undine," p. 183.

³³"Winter Light," p. 302.

³⁴"I Know The Dark and Hovering Moth," p. 220.

³⁵"Undine," p. 183.

infinitely greater than the poet's pregnancy. Through his advances he has unleashed a monstrous passion that annihilates him.

And I am like water in a scoop of stone
Kissed into absence by a drying sun; . . . 36

The inadequacy of the poet's maleness against this devastating force is imaged in the pitifully small scoop of water in contrast to the pitiless sun. Layton's male fire is first transformed to water and then devoured by the sun. The act of love has become a power struggle in which the poet is fighting against a titanic force. He is ". . . possessed" 37
". . . broken. . . ." 38 ". . . Kissed into absence" 39
". . . dried" 40 through the act of love. But here the paradox commences in a miraculous transfiguration. Through the dismemberment of love, the poet undergoes an experience in division and polarity--". . . so broken's my entire self" 41 despite the death his passion imposes it also provides the growth principle and "Undine" moistens his nipples into ". . . a blazing garden" 42 In a process of self-transcendence Layton becomes more than the original fevered lover of pregnant hands, he becomes a garden, an entity of abundant growth that is akin to the irrational Dionysian

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

thrust of the universe itself. Now he can assert his power over the lady, and through her over nature:

And I your paramour-Paracelsus
 Fish a soul for you from between my loins;
 You shudder in my embrace
 And all your wetness takes the form of tears.⁴³

"Winter Light" portrays the ambiguities of love examined in "Undine."

With you
 I am negated and fulfilled

In you and through you
 I am perpetuated and destroyed,
 the child of our furious blood,
 a phantom hand touching
 pregnant summer cloud
 and perishing seed

Shiva dances on Somerled avenue
 and in our bedroom

A million roosters cry up the sun;
 at night when we embrace
 we hear the silence of God.⁴⁴

"... negated and fulfilled . . . ,"⁴⁵ " . . . perpetuated and destroyed" ⁴⁶ Layton portrays the ambivalence of love in the image of Shiva. Love leads the poet face to face with Shiva, the destroyer. But the god will turn, and the poet will also see Brahma, the creator--they are both the same god, and the destruction and creation are a continuum, necessary poles.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ "Winter Light," p. 302.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

of existence. Love is envisioned as cacophony and silence, noontide and night. It is the way down by which the poet may assert his manhood and dominate reality. As the roosters, archetypal symbols of the phallus,⁴⁷ ". . . cry up the sun" dominating that which dominates change and time, the lovers, in unison with each other, and the cosmic rhythm of the flame, ". . . embrace . . ." and ". . . hear the silence of God. . . ."

Love then, is a process of death and resurrection. Resurrection is associated with creativity--". . . a blazing garden"48 ". . . the child of our furious blood"49 As in the previous chapter, Layton may assert (life, create, and become the father, through sacrifice. The sun is positioned in "Undine" and "Winter Light" to emphasise the necessity of division. There is a submerged, often shadowy or fleeting intimation of the sun at the point of death--". . . Kissed into absence by a drying sun"50 ". . . a phantom hand touching/ pregnant summer cloud/ and perishing seed"51 At the rebirth the outline becomes clear because the poet has experienced the lacustral cloud, and the sun bursts radiantly

⁴⁷William Willeford, The Fool and His Sceptre: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and Their Audience (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1969), p. 12.

⁴⁸"Undine," p. 183.

⁴⁹"Winter Light," p. 302.

⁵⁰"Undine," p. 183.

⁵¹"Winter Light," p. 302.

forth--" . . . you moisten/ My parched nipples into a blazing
 garden . . . "52 " . . . A million roosters cry up the sun
 . . . "53

Layton's love poems centred around the imagery of fire,
 and the polarity and division of love, culminate in "I Know
 The Dark And Hovering Moth."54 Once more woman is seen as
 a castrating influence whose ". . . furred wings overwhelm
 the sun . . ."55--Layton's symbol for sexual omnipotence.
 This castration leads to the melting of the poet's fiery
 maleness and a death into what Eli Mandel calls ". . . Hell's
 sexual landscape . . ."56 In the journey back towards boy-
 hood, the poet experiences emotions that stand in direct
 contrast to adult, mature love. Instead of unity, there is
 the dismemberment of Urizen; instead of joy in creativity
 there is delight in violence; instead of creation, there is
 murder:

William Blake spied the vanishing heel,
 Made all the white stars in heaven reel.
 I heard his wild, dismayed shout.
 Rib by rib Urizen lugged me out.

Now at early dawn, my heart with joy,
 Like any carefree holiday boy
 I look at the minnows in the pond
 And catch and kill them: they make no sound.

Lovely Aviva, shall we crush moths?
 Geldings stone till we're out of breath?
 Wipe the minnows from the goat-god's brow?
 He hears their screams; he rejoices now 57

52 "Undine," p. 183.

53 "Winter Light," p. 302.

54 "I Know The Dark And Hovering Moth," p. 220.

55 Ibid.

56 Eli Mandel, Irving Layton, p. 33.

57 "I Know The Dark And Hovering Moth," p. 220.

At the end of this inverted, polar journey, lies the sun, throbbing with sexual energy. Representing the poet's symbol of omnipotence, it includes the polarities of violence and love, and lies at the extremities of experience. Reaching the antinomial point, Layton commences his journey back toward love and fulfillment. At once creative images appear:

From crows we'll brew a cunning leaven;
 From harsh nettles: lock them in a poem.
 The virtuous reading it at once
 Will change into rimed and sapless stumps.

My proud Love we'll water them, embrace
 Over their unleaving wretchedness:
 Till snakes cavort in gardens and sing
 Melic praises for each mortal thing; . . . 58

With the loved one, the poet will brew the transforming agent that will revitalize the negation he has encountered. As in "Undine" water nourishes the germinal idea, and the sapless stumps are transformed into a garden, presided over by the flame-like snakes, dancing, cavorting, and singing. Thus the moth is vanquished, and transformed into a butterfly; paradoxically the redemptive symbol arises from water. From the waters of oblivion, the primal fish, associated with masculinity in "Undine," asserts its dominance; once more a dialectical experience leads to self-transcendence. The ultimate experience is an acknowledgement of the duality of existence; presided over by the sun that resides at once at the extremities, it is a symbol of a unity that lies within the balanced tension of the universal process. This is Layton's

celebration of sexual desire. Unity may be attained, duality may be transcended, but only through sacrifice and the total awareness of all opposition. Love-violence, manhood-boyhood, masculinity-femininity, unity-dismemberment, fire-water, are all points of definition, and necessary to each other. The last two lines of the poem are entirely ambiguous. Directions, words, images, antithetically merge, maintaining a dynamic balance. Hell encloses the sun, that encloses Hell; protruding male shafts become concave female ". . . sloping shafts . . .";⁵⁹ the sun is hermaphroditic. Layton has glimpsed the paradox that defies logical analysis. With warp and woof he weaves his poem as an expression of the ultimate unity abiding in total polarity.

Layton endeavours to understand this existential paradox of unity and division in "My Flesh Comfortless."⁶⁰ Life without love is portrayed as desolation, a state of anguish and despair. Xanthic, love represents the pure colour of fire; xanthic it is water soluble, washing away the yellow flame of manhood. Ultimately love is vision enclosed in a ". . . cold bead . . ."⁶¹ Layton expresses this ambiguity of form and energy through the xanthic beads of the frog. Love is ". . . underworld savvy . . ."⁶² and ". . . vacancy

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰"My Flesh Comfortless," p. 370.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

expressed . . . ;⁶³ it is an " . . . unblinking eye . . . "⁶⁴
 defined against a " . . . fulvid lid . . . ;"⁶⁵ it is a
 " . . . slim fairytale" prince . . . / The universal lover, my
 Jack/ Of hearts . . . "⁶⁶ defined against " . . . A royal
 maniac raving, / Whirlwind's tongue, desolation's lung? Or
 flung/ At the edge of this drear pool--mansoul, / Privity of
 evil, world's wrong, dung . . . ;"⁶⁷ it is lechery defined
 against eros; it is passion and desire defined against spiri-
 tual fulfillment; it is the circle of bondage and the circle
 of eternity. Thus Layton is portrayed as enclosed by love
 (" . . . O, Love enclose me in your cold bead . . . "),⁶⁸ and
 by vile emptiness (" . . . And this vile emptiness encloses/
 Makes me too its rapt pupil . . . ").⁶⁹ The ambiguity of love
 is ultimately expressed as Layton looking at himself, divided
 between the dialectics of lust and love. Once more the poet
 has reached the " . . . cold bead . . . "⁷⁰ of knowledge of
 polarity. This will lead to death, godliness, and the "hot
 bead" of the sun:

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

O, Love, enclose me in your cold bead

O lift me like a vine-leaf on the vine;
In community of soil and sun
Let me not taste this desolation

But hear roar and pour of waters unseen
In mountains that parallel my road--
Sun vaulting gold against their brightest green!⁷¹

Man's dilemma is enacted by the process of nature.

Layton often portrays the sun (male) setting into water (female); this leads to death and night, antecedent to rebirth and noontide.

I have seen . . .

The sun sinking
bloodied and gorgeous
into the ocean . . .
("My Eyes Have Seen the Glory.")⁷²

. . . . Observe with instigated eyes
The sun that empties itself upon the water . . .
("The Swimmer.")⁷³

The sun is bleeding to death,
covering the lake
with its luxuriant blood:
("Boys Bathing.")⁷⁴

The name "Undine" intimates that the act of love is more than a personal affair; through the water sprite, Layton identifies the female principle with all of nature. Nature and love are intimately connected, for the cyclic rhythm of summer and

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²"My Eyes Have Seen The Glory." LLM, p. 45.

⁷³"The Swimmer," p. 2.

⁷⁴"Boys Bathing," p. 29.

winter is an analogy to the death and rebirth experienced by the poet through the act of love. The remorse of lust and indignation portrayed in "By Ecstasies Perplexed" is emphasised by an arid and diminutive nature. The poet's death in "Blue And Lovely, My Love" is enacted amidst the natural manifestations of the universe. It is through nature's fecundity, proliferation and metamorphosis however, that he glimpses the apocalypse inherent in his death. The death and resurrection of love examined in "Undine" and "Winter Light" are enacted against the cyclical rhythm of nature. The sterile Sahara is moistened into a garden ("Undine"), whilst the pregnant summer cloud passes over the perishing seed of winter ("Winter Light").

This concept of human love paralleling the natural cycle of nature is seen in "Love The Conqueror Worm." The seasonal change of late summer is necessary for the rebirth of spring:

Mid-August the frenzied cicadas
 Apprise the scene-shifters
 Where each prop goes:
 Where the dank empery of bush,
 And where the spacious blossomers.

Now lofty for the spinning year,
 For the stripling I see pass
 Dragging the summer by the ear;
 The flooding sun,
 And the green fires in the grass⁷⁵

The poem demonstrates a vital nature that is joyfully engrossed in its preparation for the coming winter. The peak of summer

⁷⁵"Love The Conqueror Worm," p. 83.

57

must succumb to the death of winter. Nature is described in sexual terms; her "... insanities,/ The perversity in flesh and fern;/ ... her lecheries ..."⁷⁶ intimate man's affinity to the rhythm of the universal process. The oaks "... Which bare,/ Straining, the hoar/ Frost on them, stand each winter there/ Like courtly masochists/ Whimpering 'Encore! Encore!' ..."⁷⁷ typify nature's program--"Love The Conqueror Worm." This ambiguous statement reveals the antinomies inherent in the act of love. Time-infected, man cannot escape his temporality; youth will overflow into old age and death as naturally as summer passes into winter. Man is the victim. But the worm which will eventually devour him will continue the cycle of death and rebirth, thus man's death is antecedent to rebirth according to the organic laws of the flame. Yet, "Love The Conqueror Worm" also intimates the immediate, redemptive potential of man. Love "... transform(s) our grasping, unpleasant selves into temporary divinities and has us capering on the streets with the glory and arrogance of gods ..."⁷⁸ Through nature the poet finds the manner by which he may redeem himself in love and become the victor, the conqueror, despite his continual victimization.

Conversely, through love, the poet understands the "... insanities ..." of nature. In "Composition In Late

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Love Where the Nights are Long, p. 11.

Spring"⁷⁹ the experience of love, precipitates him into an understanding of the natural rhythm of rebirth. In such a mood of joy and wonder, the lover/poet describes the process of nature in terms that are interchangeable with the act of love. As he observes the reciprocity of love/nature the poet is swept up by the proliferating fecundity, vitality and exfoliation of life. A singer in season, he experiences a moment of power, and of ecstasy, observing the continual cyclical rhythm of all things and the necessity of antinomial tension.

Through such understanding of the flaming continuum of all opposition, the poet can write "What Does It Matter?" It is the continual devastation of love that precipitates the poet, into ". . . immortality . . ." ⁸⁰ ". . . The price comes high . . ." ⁸¹ The rainy summer, the quarrels, the approaching winter, the ". . . loose garrulous women . . ." ⁸² the false women, ". . . that intoxicated me with flattery and drink . . ." ⁸³ the ". . . sad helpless ones/ that reached out for love . . ." ⁸⁴ the ". . . disgust, hatred of death, /

⁷⁹"Composition in Late Spring," p. 122.

⁸⁰"What Does It Matter?" p. 334.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid.

concupiscence . . .,"⁸⁵ that ". . . broils and blisters . . ."⁸⁶
 are all part of a lover/poet's special hell--". . . it has
 a view opening on Heaven . . ."⁸⁷ Due to the cosmic flame's
 cyclic rhythm the devastation will resolve itself into apo-
 calypse and then fall back into its antithesis in a continual
 metamorphosis of death and rebirth. Thus Layton can say to
 his lover:

Yet believe this:
 it is my destiny
 from any ditch
 to walk out clean;
 and though I lie drunk with poetry and wine,
 my back is never to the stars,
 my face never in the muck;
 and always I feel your presence
 brooding over me like the summer sky
 where your face, a star,
 is clearly seen
 (Ah, I am really sloshed!)
 and multiplied in the million lights that shine⁸⁸

This is the ultimate paradox, expressed in the regression of
 "I Know The Dark And Hovering Moth," and the destruction of
 "Undine." The union of love will ultimately lead to the
 monarchical omnipotence of the sun.

The remorse and bitterness of such poems as "By Ecstasies
 Perplexed" and "Mahogany Red" dim the splendour of the love
 act and its metamorphic potential. Although this aspect of

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Ibid.

love in undeniable, man must not succumb nor dwell upon it. Following the dynamic thrust to life exhibited by nature he must affirm the all-encompassing paradox of love and assert good and bad, life and death, remorse and ecstasy, rapture and suffering, ". . . tender or brutal; obscene, lustful, visionary, animal . . . anarchic or responsible, sacramental or earthy; destroyer and preserver . . ." ⁸⁹ Thus Layton writes of his affirmation of love despite the bitterness and remorse depicted in some poems:

If thinking of the mad things I've done
For your white shoulders and sapphire eyes;
How my hands across your breasts will run
Even as you mock me with your lies

Or that my soul lives between your thighs
Like a seed stuck to a moist furrow;
Or that submerged in Eros' narrow
Straits for its periscope it cries and cries:

I come suddenly on some bush, ferns,
Cove grass, or birds that flock after flock
Spring from the deep gorges the sun burns:
Lizards running into clefts of rock

I laugh and praise the Dionysian
Everywhere irrational thrust
That sends meteors spilling into dust,
This enchantment risen in the bone. ⁹⁰

The poet is annihilated by the act of love; yet the redemptive example of nature is always present and the ". . . seed stuck to a moist furrow . . ." ⁹¹ will undergo the necessary death and metamorphosis that will enable it to reach

⁸⁹Love Where the Nights are Long, p. 16.

⁹⁰"Logos," p. 286.

⁹¹Ibid.

fruition. This simile between the poet's death-in-love and the seed's natural growth cycle emphasises the enduring relationship between man and nature. Through the example of nature the poet can exult in the destruction of love and of woman, and realise the apocalypse that is inherent in the death of metamorphosis. Exultation brings laughter and praise:

I laugh and praise the Dionysian
Everywhere irrational thrust⁹²

Again and again the poet reiterates this theme:

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.

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."⁹³

" . . . You have the gift of praise . . . "⁹⁴ -- this is the manner by which man can transcend the tragic implications of the flame, and exult in its pain and destruction. Praise will

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³"Vexata Quaestio," p. 84.

⁹⁴Ibid.

unite him with the monarchical sun and lift him momentarily into a position of dominance and control. Such a moment is brief; as in the poems of contemplation, man cannot abide at the cardinal point of the flame, but must capitulate to the cyclic rhythm of dusk and death:

Then the wind which all day
Had run regattas through the fields
Grew chill, became
A tree-dismantling wind;

The sun went down
And called my brown skin in.⁹⁵

The beneficial sun that gives man the power of dominance, is also the destructive sun of death and decay. Victor for an instant, man must also be the victim and succumb to the time-infected nature of his own flaming. This poem clearly demonstrates the ambiguous nature of the sun, which at once resides at the pivotal point of vision, but nevertheless unrelentingly sweeps man towards his own destruction.

"Fortuna et Cupidas"⁹⁶ demonstrates man's victimization and the poet's resolve through praise. Like the chokecherries, man too is a fruit that will reach perfection and perish through the creative/destructive influence of the sun. Life is portrayed as an inevitable process of growth and decay. Caught within the ". . . Appetite and chance, luck and desire . . ." ⁹⁷ that ". . . together make a man's fate . . ." ⁹⁸

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶"Fortuna et Cupidas," LLM, p. 10.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Ibid.

he is destined to ". . . graph his days . . ." ⁹⁹ according to the cyclical, rhythmic tension exhibited by the flame. Strung out on the graph paper of life, ". . . these intangible bars infrangibly up and down . . ." ¹⁰⁰ he must endure the crucifixion of all antinomies until he reaches the fruition that will destroy him. Love, however, is a gamble, and man may choose his own stakes. Spinning ". . . merrily merrily/ in the roulette wheel of sexuality . . ." ¹⁰¹ Layton intimates the redemptive and healing powers of love; merrily, merrily, love redeems the unending imprisonment of man's time-infected nature. A gambler who plays for the highest stakes risks all in the hope of winning all. Despite the continual possibility of catastrophic loss, he consumes himself away in a bold and passionate game of chance played against overwhelming odds. The gambler/lover may only live in such a defiant and courageous manner. Such joyous affirmation, such giving of oneself is akin to the effulgence of the sun, and the passionate abandon of Dionysus; gods of excess, they alone are worthy to rule as the gods of love, a love that is pagan, unrestrained, and self-consuming. Once more Layton's assertion of Joyful Wisdom is imaged in the dance. The dancers weave their fates with destiny, mingling their flame-like bodies with the cosmic flame of unending flux. Such outpouring of motion, of joy

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

and of praise, is the manner by which man may unite with the bold and pitiless sun and achieve a temporary and tenuous domination over reality.

Despite the paradox of life and death, intimated by the love act; despite its enigmatic nature of lust/love, violence/peace, death/rebirth, destruction/creation, ultimately it is these dualities which make love an experience worthy of man's praise:

But beauty to be beauty /
Should be flawed

 not dead;
So I, a formal creature
Of fiery flesh and bone

 declare
Streetlamps are the exact circuit of despair
For light imprisoned in the black air.

And only love is truly perfect, a fire, still,
And though partial from excess of joy
 nevertheless, like genius, irrefutable. 102

Chapter IV.

The Poet.

The lover and the meditator are masks that thinly disguise Layton's true identity as creator/poet. Thus in Layton's poems of contemplation, the reader glimpses the persona of the poet, which is present in every experience in which Layton is involved. In "My Flesh Comfortless"¹ he is writing; in "If I Lie Still"² love and imagination coalesce into a single verse; in "For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation On Flies and Kings"³ he defines himself as poet over and against the masses who ". . . do not dance . . ."⁴ In "A Tall Man Executes A Jig"⁵ and "New Tables"⁶ contemplation leads to creativity. The act of contemplation, precursive to creativity, is expressed by Layton in a prose examination of the poetic process as ". . . the psychic phenomenon of passive, expectant concentration . . ."⁷ The lover becomes the poet in "I Know The Dark And Hovering Moth;"⁸ in "Undine"⁹ the expression of love

¹"My Flesh Comfortless," p. 370.

²"If I Lie Still," p. 248.

³"For Mao Tse-Tung . . .," p. 438.

⁴Ibid.

⁵"A Tall Man Executes A Jig," p. 383.

⁶"New Tables," p. 326.

⁷Irving Layton, The Laughing Rooster (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), p. 21.

⁸"I Know The Dark And Hovering Moth," p. 220.

⁹"Undine," p. 183.

leads to an act of imaginative creativity. In "Composition In Late Spring"¹⁰ the experience of love precipitates the poetic potential within him:

No one is more happy, none can do more tricks.
 The sun melts like butter
 Over, my sweetcorn thoughts;
 And, at last, both famous and good
 I'm a Doge, a dog
 At the end of a terrace
 Where poems like angels like flakes of powder
 Quaver above my prickling skin.¹¹

In "What Does It Matter?" the lover equates his death and rebirth in love to the poet's vision:

This has been a rainy summer.
 Once or twice we quarrelled.
 What does it matter?
 The main thing as we say
 when we embrace
 is that we love each other:
 that, mutatis mutandis, we know
 with the finality of calendar
 and equinox,
 the summer's here
 though the days are sullen and wet
 and our teeth shake at night
 louder than wooden windowframes.

Yes, I have known loose garrulous women.
 What does it matter?
 And restless, beautiful ones
 that intoxicated me with flattery and drink.
 What does it matter?

Again, what does it matter?
 A poet lives in a special hell
 --it has a view opening on heaven;¹²

¹⁰ "Composition In Late Spring." p. 122.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "What Does It Matter?" p. 334.

In poems that describe the creative process, such as "Soleil de Noces"¹³, the act of poetry is expressed as both inspiration and physical love:

I wait
for the good lines,
to come.
At the right moment
the sun
will explode them
in my back yard.

Then I shall
pick them off
the lion-
coloured road
and this unfractured
greenery,
thistle
and speargrass,
like bits of clothing.

When the gods
begin
to batter me
I shall howl
like a taken
virgin.¹⁴

Vision does not rest in love and contemplation, but in a poetic rendering of these experiences in metaphor and paradox. Love and contemplation are ways of giving form and meaning to experience, but poetry is the ultimate means to express the existential riddle of the cosmic flame, for it incorporates and resolves the dialectics of this burning cosmos. Layton writes:

¹³"Soleil de Noces," p. 9.

¹⁴Ibid.

Poems do not give us truth but
 Reveal like lightning the
 Forked road that leads us to it.¹⁵

In "The Cold Green Element,"¹⁶ the lover and the contemplator are incorporated into Layton's identity as poet. This poet must undergo the devastation and destruction of his dichotomic vision. In the moment of fruition, Layton, lying in the environment associated with his poems of contemplation, and acting like ". . . a lover . . ." undergoes the death of creativity. His apocalypse as poet (" . . . brilliant hunchback with a crown of leaves . . .")¹⁷ is documented:

And turning over I embrace like a lover
 the trunk of a tree, one of those
 for whom the lightning was too much
 and grew a brilliant
 hunchback with a crown of leaves.

The ailments escaped from the labels
 of medicine bottles are all fled to the wind;
 I've seen myself lately in the eyes
 of old women,
 spent streams mourning my manhood,

in whose old pupils the sun became
 a bloodsmear on broad catalpa leaves
 and hanging from ancient twigs,
 my murdered selves
 sparked the air like the muted collisions
 of fruit¹⁸

Through the devastation of creative unity the lover, the contemplator and the poet become the sacrificial, mythological.

¹⁵"Poetry And Truth," LLM, p. 15.

¹⁶"The Cold Green Element," p. 170.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

god of passion and madness.¹⁹ The ultimate dichotomy is
 ". . . my murdered selves/ sparked the air like muted collisions/
 of fruit" The sparks are the act of poetry, the fruit is
 the maturity, the wisdom, and the tragic vision of the poet.

"The Birth of Tragedy" is a poem of contemplation,
 ". . . passionate meditations . . ." ²⁰ in which the poet exam-
 ines the universal process, and is reduced to ". . . A quiet
 madman, never far from tears . . ." ²¹ by the paradox of form
 and energy, the perfection of art and the imperfection of
 existence. The flame-like characteristics of the logos are
 distinctly recorded; the dialectics of tension, the reverber-
 ating flux of becoming, and the fecundity of the world will
 are all manifested in the landscape of this poem. ". . . Nature's

¹⁹ Eli Mandel has documented this:

At its most exact, whenever Layton's imagination concentrates to the point of vision, the hanged, dying, dead, lacerated god of madness appears. We see him, for example, in "The Birth of Tragedy" as "a quiet madman, never far from tears." As the hanged poet of "The Cold Green Element" he becomes Orpheus (a familiar transformation of Dionysius). He seems to be lurking in the sun's transformations ("a dying god upon the blood red hills") of "A Tall Man Executes A Jig," and through the insect imagery of "Boardwalk at Verdun," he becomes the "World" who is "a brilliant madman." He is somewhere present in "Seven O'Clock Lecture," perhaps in the blood-soaked planet's dance about Apollo; and, of course, he is the presiding spirit of Layton's prose. . . .

The god's manifestation signifies the poet's awareness of his own creativity. And the poet's identification with him means that the poet takes on prophetic power. (pp. 24-25.)

²⁰ "The Birth Of Tragedy," p. 121.

²¹ Ibid.

divided things/ tree, mould on tree . . . ,²² " . . . water
 and reflection . . . ,²³ sunlit moths with their attendant
 shadows, a garden of " . . . flowering stone . . . ,²⁴
 " . . . passionate meditations . . . ,²⁵ life, and death, are
 aspects of a balanced tension. There is a continual upward-
 downward movement--the darting moths dropping shadows, the
 perfect gods " . . . who, friends to the ascending orders,/
 sustain all passionate meditations/ and call down pardons/
 for the insurgent blood . . . ,²⁶ The all-encompassing flux
 and flow of the universal process is summed up in the image
 of the inflammable air, tumbling " . . . on many robin's
 wings . . . ,²⁷ At the centre of this eternal mass in the
 midpoint of the poem are the perfect gods. Thus the poem
 takes on the image of a flame--a still centre surrounded by
 an everflowing periphery. This is sustained by the circular
 process of the poem.²⁸

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ . . . while someone from afar off
 blows birthday candles for the world

And me happiest when I compose poems . . .
 ("The Birth Of Tragedy.")

In the Collected Poems there is a period after the last
 line. This is a publishing error. Layton intended the poem to
 be cyclical, repetitive, and recurrent.

Once more as in "If I Lie Still," "My Flesh Comfortless," and "A Tall Man Executes A Jig," the poet, in "The Birth Of Tragedy," lies amidst the universal process, and achieves a unity in which the flame of life flows through him. He becomes the still centre of fusion, where all change occurs, the catalytic principle by which experience is transformed into creativity. As a poet he has become flame-like and is thus at the ambiguous point of consummation, where he is a perfect god. He has reached fruition; seasonably, he has arranged his own death. Nature's divided things coalesce through his poetic powers and he has imposed Apollonian form upon the irrational Dionysian thrust of the reverberating flux. Thus he becomes ". . . like a slain thing . . ." ²⁹ for he has produced a gravestone, a poem, as a monument to the vital process he wanted to record.

²⁹"The Birth Of Tragedy," p. 121.

This concept is portrayed in "The Graveyard."

And death's akin to art, and artists please
To the measure they have stilled the contraries.
(*"The Graveyard,"* p. 489.)

Elie Mandel writes:

In its simplest version, Layton's story of the poet is of a mad-man dreaming of perfect forms. The story finds its finest expression in the justly praised "The Birth of Tragedy." As the Nietzschean title suggests, the poem tells of Dionysius who dreamed the mad dream of perfection and so was slain and became Apollo. Poetry appears, then, as a kind of death because, just as "living things arrange their death," "seasonably," or in the "fruition" of poetry, so poetry too "composes" its own death. Its creation, "flowering stone," "a footstool for the perfect gods," is the product of "a quiet madman" who is slain by the perfection of his created forms, his death a birthday for the burning world. (p. 25, Irving Layton)

72

The present tense of "The Birth Of Tragedy," ". . . And me happiest when I compose poems . . .,"³⁰ and the repetition of the poetic process implicit in its cyclical structure, intimates that the act of poem-making transcends the finished product which imposes form upon the flux and flow of experience. The poetic process is the vital and ~~dynamic~~ means by which the poet can, for a brief moment, express the riddles, paradox, perversities and insanities of existence. Writing about the creative process in the preface to The Laughing Rooster Layton equates inspiration with the antinomial tension inherent in all things. True to the flaming principle of the cosmos, it is an act of ambiguity, an act of ". . . Confusions . . . doubts, perplexities, inner conflicts, joy, desire, chagrin-- the terror and ecstasy of living beyond one's psychic means . . ."³¹ At such a moment the poet is at once ". . . passive and alert, detached yet all-absorbed, ice and fire . . ."³² Significantly Layton likens the poetic process to the scrubbing of a window pane to allow the sunlight to come through.³³

Despite this tension and ambiguity however, poetry enables the poet momentarily to dominate reality. The dynamism of the poetic phenomenon is expressed in "The Fertile Muck" and "The Birth of Tragedy."

³⁰"The Birth Of Tragedy," p. 121.

³¹Preface to The Laughing Rooster, p. 17.

³²Ibid., p. 18.

³³Ibid., p. 22.

There are brightest apples on those trees
 but until I, fabulist, have spoken
 They do not know their significance . . .
 ("The Fertile Muck.")³⁴

I am their core. Let them swap,
 bandy, like a flame swerve
 I am their mouth; as a mouth I serve . . .
 ("The Birth of Tragedy.")³⁵

Nature creates man, sweeping him into its fecundity and proliferation of fruition and destruction. Yet the poet, by an act of imagination dominates reality, for nature needs man as much as man needs nature. They reciprocate their victor-victim duality.

This concept of poetry as the ultimate and only means to man's freedom is examined in "What Ever Else Poetry Is Freedom."³⁶ From the quiet madman of "The Birth Of Tragedy" to buffoon, the poet acknowledges the inadequacy of rational thought, and the ultimate contradiction and absurdity of existence. A clown includes the possibilities of comedy and tragedy; he makes possible the impossible, creating the ambivalent feelings of laughter and tears; he is madman, genius, and idiot, the coincidentia oppositorum,³⁷ an ambiguous, shifting, changing, flame-like character. Man's freedom is the ability to embrace, affirm, and praise the opposites in

³⁴"The Fertile Muck," p. 28.

³⁵"The Birth of Tragedy," p. 121.

³⁶"Whatever Else Poetry Is Freedom," p. 316.

³⁷The Fool and his Sceptre, p. xviii.

life. However, by his very nature he is burdened with a singular conceptual problem, thought divides the opposites and he cannot conceive the dialectical continuum. Using the flame image as an ideal, Layton conceives of poetry as an ironic balance of tension that holds the dichotomies in a tense unity calling into service the "honest lies" of myth, metaphor, and paradox. This ironic balance of tensions is revealed in the image of the poet/clown on stilts; the poet transfigures reality and invents a tenuous equilibrium that presides over opposition:

Whatever else poetry is freedom.
 Forget the rhetoric, the trick of lying
 All poets pick up sooner or later. From the river,
 Rising like the thin voice of grey castratos--the mist;
 Poplars and pines grow straight but oaks are gnarled;
 Old codgers must speak of death, boys break windows;
 Women lie honestly by their men at last.

And I who gave my Kate a blackened eye
 Did to its vivid changing colours
 Make up an incredible musical scale;
 And now I balance on wooden stilts and dance
 And thereby sing to the loftiest casements.
 See how with polish I bow from the waist.
 Space for these stilts! More space or I fail!³⁸

The equilibrium is fragile, and the poet totters and sways, but each time he falls, he may climb up again and affirm life as an aesthetic act. As he dances, sways, totters, swivels, falls, and rises, he incarnates the universal process, living the flaming image of consummation.

³⁸"Whatever Else Poetry Is Freedom," p. 316.

This image of Layton atop of two stilts is his own variation of the god-on-a-tree, seen in the ". . . murdered selves . . ." ³⁹ of "The Cold Green Element" and the quiet madman who lies like a slain thing in "The Birth Of Tragedy." ⁴⁰ The stilts, however, are now under the control of the user, thus they may be extended in an ever-increasing circumference until the poet reaches his utmost limit of endurance. The longer the stilts however, the wider the circumference, the more tenuous the equilibrium, the harder the fall, the longer the climb up, the greater the view. Another significant fact concerning Layton's "cross" is that it is entirely earth-centred, descending into existence, ascending in imagination, never transcending but embracing the universal process which leads to self-transcendence. Wearing the crown of the buffoon and the wreath of death, he is king of opposition, living and dying, rising and falling, flaming and consuming with vitality and aplomb. Thus he can affirm the negation of life, employing man's unique ". . . gift of praise . . ." ⁴¹ for his stave of poetry will provide the bridge towards the positive aspects of existence;

³⁹ "The Cold Green Element," p. 170.

⁴⁰ "The Birth Of Tragedy," p. p. 121.

⁴¹ "Vexato Quaestio," v. 84..

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.⁴²

In a similar manner to the broomstick used as a child, the poet
may with ". . . precarious . . . sweeps . . ." ⁴³ produce the
". . . mysterious flower of silence . . ." ⁴⁴ and experience
the ". . . thrill of power, of exulting joy . . ." I, I alone
had punched a rectangular space of quiet into the filthy
drunken chaos, and presented it to those older and stronger
than myself . . . ⁴⁵

The expressions of singing, laughing, dancing and weaving
provide the poet with suitable metaphors to communicate his
domination of reality, for these creative acts of praise are
a means of holding the binaries in a fusion which does not
negate the essential tension of existence. As a singer in
season he sings to the loftiest casements, and makes up an
incredible musical scale out of the diversity of experience,
spanning the antinomies in a continuum of affirmation and
". . . singing pleasure . . ." ⁴⁶ As the cosmic dancer, with

⁴²"Whatever Else Poetry Is Freedom," p. 316.

⁴³Foreword, The Collected Poems.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶"Metamorphosis," p. 167.

one foot in each dialectical sphere of existence, he leaps, swivels, sways, and totters, the flame incarnate in his actions. The dancer on poetic stilts indicates a heightened awareness, a broader conception of polarity, the tenuous equilibrium that is balanced between the destructive knowledge of polarisation, the fragility of man's grasp upon intuition and paradox, and the self-transcendence of those who truly face the realities of division. Laughter combines the possibilities of fear and praise, insanity and genius. It is the laughter of the clown and the Übermensch. In spite of the tragedy inherent in life, Layton utilises the redeeming quality of laughter. By laughing, albeit close to tears, he can transcend and dominate the unrelenting fecundity of nature as it sweeps him towards oblivion. The poet-weaver uses the warp and woof of polarization; by interpenetration of these two fundamentals a unity is formed in which the opposites are held in an ironic tension of creativity. By weaving his poem, the poet enters into harmony with the universal process, for the irrational Dionysian thrust is also an ironic balance of tension whereby life is a becoming of death. "If I Lie Still"⁴⁷ the world is negated and deathlike; consummation transcends reality. "If I Lie Still"⁴⁸ the world is transformed into eternity, it is woven into the poem that holds the alternatives,

⁴⁷"If I Lie Still," p. 248.

⁴⁸Underlining mine.

of existence in an intricate weave of myth and metaphor. Layton reiterates the power to be found in poetry in "Seven O'Clock Lecture:"

Filling their cars
With the immortal claptrap of poetry,
These singular lies with the power
to get themselves believed⁴⁹

The woven poem should hold the warp and woof of a dialectical existence in a creative whole; it at once portrays the unity of opposition and the opposition and division of existence. It shows the one and the many, peace and energy, motion and repose. It is the aesthetic experience that arises out of the fertile muck of the universe:

Good poems should rage like a fire
Burning all things, burning them with a great splendour.

One wrapt flame at noontide blends
The seer's inhuman stare, the seaweed's trance.

And poems that love the truth tell
All things have value being combustible.

Out of rubbish burning and burning comes
Mozartian ecstasy leaping with the flames.⁵⁰

The cost of the poetic existence is portrayed in "With The Money I Spend;"⁵¹ life demands extravagance in which each person must spend himself in a ". . . fine excess. . . ." ⁵² This chosen mode of existence requires attention, love and determination,

⁴⁹"Seven O'Clock Lecture," p. 110.

⁵⁰"Esthetique," p. 302.

⁵¹"With The Money I Spend," p. 122.

⁵²"The Fine Excess," LLM, p. 19.

for the vision is "... slender..."⁵³ "... delicate
 ..."⁵⁴ "... fragrant..."⁵⁵ "... velvet and remark-
 able..."⁵⁶ The "... white light to eternity..."⁵⁷
 is found not only through exuberance, abandon, and contem-
 plation of the flame-like characteristics of the universal
 process, but by ingestion, obeisance, and direct contact with
 the terrible beauty of the flame. Such contact leads to death
 and vision; enacting the ultimate polarities of existence,
 Layton lies "... slain..."⁵⁸ looking at the star/sun,
 "... counting the gold coins/ for your Turkish cigarettes and
 costly champagne..."⁵⁹ In an extraordinary image of height
 and depth, Layton shows life to be a one-to-one relationship,
 where the cost is in direct proportion to the gain; life and
 death, dark and light, are balanced in an equal ratio.

Through an experience of the inevitable opposition of
 existence, established by the cosmic flame, the moment of
 death leads to godlike self-transcendence, manifested in
 poetic creativity. Only through the honest lies of myth

⁵³ "With The Money I Spend," p. 222.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

metaphor, and paradox, may the poet express the manifold dimensions of continua and form a bridge between reality and imagination. It is in this realm of symbol, intuition and myth that Layton finds his freedom to dominate reality and the flame-like characteristics of the universal process. The creative act is recurrent, for existence is change and metamorphosis. Layton will enter the tragic forest,⁶⁰ and perceive the extremities of the sun; there will be devastation,⁶¹ negation,⁶² and unity,⁶³ when the antinomies collapse into death-like inertia, and the poet is undifferentiated from the flaming universe. He will die, and follow the diurnal death of the sun as it sinks into nonentity. But such devastation and oblivion is antecedent to the apocalypse inherent in vision. The downward movement of death will resolve itself into ascent and identification with the monarchical powers of the sun. Weaving, dancing, laughing, and singing, the poet will embrace the extremities of existence and momentarily defy the east-west polarity of a diurnal sun, erasing ". . . time's velvet tongue . . ." ⁶⁴ as past and future, time and timelessness, are woven into his intricate pattern. Layton will over-reach

⁶⁰ "For Woo Too-Tung. . ." p. 438.

⁶¹ "Undine," p. 183; "With The Money I Spend," p. 222; "The Cold Green Element," p. 170.

⁶² "Winter Light," p. 302.

⁶³ "If I Lie Still," p. 248.

⁶⁴ "Time's Velvet Tongue," p. 393.

his straddling, tenuous hold of the dichotomies, and fall from his stilts, to recommence the journey again. Throughout it all the flaming landscape will remain a constant, fluctuating and reverberating with dizzying implications, and the sun will remain omnipotent, presiding over all change, representing the crucible of life, and the unity of opposition.

Chapter V.
Social Fires.

In the preceding chapters, Layton's conception of the universal process, and his own relationship to it, is portrayed through the image of fire. Pervading his poems of personal apocalypse, the universe is portrayed as a manifestation of Heraclitean fire. Surrounded by these natural, organic, and free-flowing flames, the poet glimpses the fundamental truth of his own existence, and joins with the fiery process in a joyous affirmation of movement and song. In contrast, the fires of society are arbitrary and artificial. The process of energy, rhythm, change, and tension that so vibrantly oscillates through the poems of love, contemplation and imagination, is diminished, captured, and imprisoned by a technological society.

One of the images to pervade the poet's city landscape, is the street lamp. In "Jewish Main Street"¹ the eternal rhythm of the cosmic flame is diminished to ". . . match-heads . . ."² intimating a finite combustion and the brief splutter of light that will ignite and then die.

And first, the lamp-posts whose burning match-heads
Scatter the bog fires on the wet streets;
Then the lights from auto and store window
That flake cool and frothy in the mist
Like a beaten colloid.³

¹"Jewish Main Street," p. 35.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

The match-stick lamps act in contrast to the proud oaks,
 "... the proud flame of life/ passed through them" ⁴
 and the "... flaming athanor? . . ." ⁵ on "... the flaming
 hillside . . ." ⁶ symbols of the cosmic flame with which all
 men of creativity and courage identify. Now man has inter-
 vened; the flame-tree has been dissected into a thousand
 uniform matches, each one capped by a sulphur head that will
 be ignited and extinguished at command. The flame has become
 functional, a mere product of technology; man has dominated
 reality, not by a process of understanding and affirmation,
 but by an arbitrary and brutal seizure. The ephemeral beauty
 of the "... bog-fires . . ." ⁷ (nature's "match-heads"),
 that arise from the fertile muck of the universal process are
 "... scattered . . ." ⁸ by these man-made inventions. Man
 has invaded the inherent unity of nature and replaced the
 organic flux and flow of the cosmos with his own diminished
 and distorted conception of the flame. These street-lamps
 illuminate a society that is preoccupied with death:

Women with offspring appraise
 The solemn hypocrisies of fish
 That gorp on trays of blue tin...
 They enter the shops
 And hassle for a dead cow's rump.

⁴"Zoroastrian," p. 308.

⁵"Autumn Lines For My Son," p. 354.

⁶Ibid.

⁷"Jewish Main Street," p. 35.

⁸Ibid.

Old Jews with memories of pogroms
Shuffle across menacing doorways;
They go fearfully, quietly;
They do not wish to disturb
The knapsack of their sorrows.⁹

Similarly in "De Bullion Street"¹⁰ the lamps " . . . inverted bell-jars/ Hanging from wooden crucifixes . . ." ¹¹ and the vicious " . . . red light . . ." ¹² illuminate a scene of squalor, and degradation where " . . . private lust is public gain and shame . . ." ¹³ The " . . . Rouged whores . . ." ¹⁴ " . . . The young soldier . . ." ¹⁵ " . . . the Oriental and skipjack . . ." ¹⁶ represent a shifting and underground society who live amidst the stink of " . . . garbage pails . . ." ¹⁷ These deprived individuals and the street-lamps invent each other, for the mentality and values that prompted the erection of such lamps, are in return effected by their unhealthy glow; despair invents the lamps that breed despair. Layton writes in "Love Is An Irrefutable Fire:"

Streetlamps are the exact circuit of despair
For light imprisoned in the black air.¹⁸

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰"De Bullion Street," p. 13.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸"Love Is An Irrefutable Fire," p. 369.

Despair results from the human condition that has chosen to ignore the dialectical flame of the universal process. Replacing the flame with ". . . bell-jars . . ." ¹⁹ that drop ". . . Tiny moons . . ." ²⁰ upon the asphalt, and ". . . exact circuit(s) . . ." ²¹ the populace has endeavoured to invent an environment of perfection; they have tried to capture one aspect of the cosmic flame, but the other antinomial dimension lurks as a constant reminder to their arbitrary decision. People are not equilibrated, for they have disturbed the balance of nature; by creating "perfection" they have distorted the natural flux and flow of the universe (" . . . beauty . . . ") ²² and replaced it with an environment of ugliness and death.

Layton uses other symbols to express his conception of the human condition that at present exists amongst modern man. Store windows, neon signs, and auto lights provide a continual, disharmonious effect of brilliance, constituting an impression of ". . . electric . . ." ²³ or ". . . tinfoil . . ." ²⁴ air. Wherever these lights exist, they illuminate a society that is bored, decadent, grotesque, and deathly. Under an ". . . explosion . . ." ²⁵ of ". . . green neon signs . . ." ²⁶ at the corner of Peel and St. Catherine, the poet finds himself in

¹⁹ "De Bullion Street," p. 13.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "Love Is An Inrefutable Fire," p. 369.

²² Ibid.

²³ "Winter Fantasy," p. 162.

²⁴ "Reconciliation," p. 94.

²⁵ "Winter Fantasy," p. 162.

²⁶ Ibid.

the midst of a hideous and terrifying vision. ". . . Ruined corpses of corpulent singers/ arise from their tight mounds, sigh and/ stumble upon each other dragging/ their tattered shadows in their arms . . ." ²⁷ In a surrealist nightmare of impending death. The tattered shadows of these degenerate people act in sharp contrast to Layton's own tattered image portrayed in "The Swinging Flesh." ²⁸ His affirmation of the cosmic flame reduces the poet to ". . . flesh/ That burns on its stick of bone . . ." ²⁹ But despite the devastation, he ". . . swings . . ." ³⁰ expressing the rhythm of the flame. Under the green neon lights, the grotesque and spectral shadows have lost such rhythm and harmony; sighing, stumbling, and dragging themselves along, their pitiful movements express their own inner corruption. Their mouths which are the potential vehicles of praise, are reduced to ". . . fatalistic bulbs going on and off . . ." ³¹

This image of a swinging, flame-like poet defined against a deathly society is portrayed in "Whatever Else Poetry Is Freedom." ³² At ". . . certain middays . . ." ³³ the poet-on-stilts

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ "The Swinging Flesh," p. 101.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Winter Fantasy," p. 162.

³² "Whatever Else Poetry Is Freedom," p. 316.

³³ Ibid.

dancing and singing of freedom, watches the cars that bring
 ". . . from afar their windshield suns;/ What lay to my hand
 were blue fenders,/ The sun's extinguished, the drivers wear-
 ing sunglasses./ And it made me think I had touched a hearse
" ³⁴ This poem describes Layton's supreme affirmation

of the necessity of opposition and tension, that is symbolized
 by the sun and its ". . . accompanying shadow . . ." ³⁵ The
 poet's courage, joy and exuberance in the face of such opposi-
 tion is in direct contrast to the populace who shelter them-
 selves from the sun in cars, and hide from the sun's brilliance
 behind sunglasses. Juxtaposed with the cyclical image of the

cosmic flame ("And Time flames like a paraffin stove/ And
 what it burns are the minutes I live . . ."), ³⁶ is the linear
 direction of the ". . . windshield suns . . ." of society.

Organic rhythm, harmony, joy and exaltation have been replaced
 by the populace, with their own conception of time and direction.
 The poet perceives that such direction leads only to a living
 death, rather than the continual death-in-life inherent in the
 metamorphic principles of the cosmic flame.

"Spikes" ³⁷ proclaims Layton's most devastating condem-
 nation of modern society. In this poem the stumbling movements

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ "Spikes," p. 185.

are stilled as the whole city becomes one gigantic cemetery, each suburban window marking the tomb of a family. The ". . . great empty pall-black squares" . . ."³⁸ resemble a catacomb built for a whole civilization which has lost its soul to technology. ". . . Blinded by too many lights . . .,"³⁹ mankind has averted his face from the true nature of existence; through pride he bathes himself in self-constructed brilliance that extinguishes the true nature of the universe. By excluding such necessary antinomies, by trying to live with an unnatural replica of the true cosmic flame, he has built cities of death; by imposing arbitrary designs upon the natural flux and flow of the universal process he has attempted to stifle the irrational fluidity of the universe. Antinomial tension, however, is life; any attempt at reconciliation results in death.

Layton explores this subject in "Seven O'Clock Lecture."⁴⁰ His poem is based upon the themes of tension, flux, change, rhythm, energy, and ecstasy. But this is the age of ". . . a laundered emotion . . .,"⁴¹ a ". . . well-lit/ fluorescent age . . .,"⁴² when man is ". . . washed clean of Death and Agony . . .,"⁴³ Unidimensional, mankind lacks the necessary

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰ "Seven O'Clock Lecture," p. 110.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

tension of an existential life, and does not embrace every aspect of the human condition. Decadent, dying, and arbitrary he lives within the confines of his own artificial-creations. The fine excess, the gift of extravagance and boundless giving is annihilated by the very excess and extravagance of modern society. ". . . The permanent bloom on all time-infected things" ⁴⁴ is negated by the permanence of an all-encompassing fluorescence that disperses the shadows which form a necessary part of existence. Rhythm and harmony are replaced by awkward and shuffling movements; beauty is replaced by squalor, eternity is replaced by finitude, the joy of a life vitally lived gives way to the misery of a living death.

Through identity with the universal flame, the poet achieved a certain eternity. Intensity and affirmation provoked moments of timelessness; in such moments the poet became the universal flame and participated in its eternal recurrence. In contrast to this cosmic flame, the neon signs, the street lamps, window and auto lights, are associated with linear time. Rhythm provokes eternity; discord and disharmony interrupt this rhythm and time becomes arbitrary and measured. Thus the awkward movements of those who live under the neon signs increase the reader's awareness of linear time. Conversely, the inherent rhythm of the poet's apotheosis with the flame draws the reader into an intuited awareness of organic timelessness. In the poems that pertain to city lights, the element

⁴⁴ Ibid.

of arbitrary time is evident--street lights switched on at night, and extinguished in the morning, bulbs going on and off, neon signs flashing, auto lights, and ". . . windshield suns . . ." ⁴⁵ whizzing by. Such abrupt and jarring visual stimulation constantly divides the hours into light and dark, and divides the minutes into a multitude of disparate seconds. This concept is explored in "New Year's Eve." ⁴⁶ Significantly in Times Square, the ". . . dark crowd . . ." ⁴⁷ wait for the passing of time, the death of an old year, the beginning of a new year. Change and flux do not occur organically for these people; it does not arise as a fluid and harmonious process out of the old, such as occurs with the rhythmic flame. Rather, at a given time, at the sixtieth part of the hour, and the sixtieth part of a minute, the old will die and the new will abruptly come into being. Layton writes:

Their deity:
 not change or flux
 but unchanging, abstract Time.
 I see one or two kneel in prayer

As the two hands
 of the illuminated clock
 freeze into one,
 the crowd expels
 the new year
 from its lungs
 with a sharp cry

⁴⁵ "Whatever Else Poetry Is Freedom," p. 316.

⁴⁶ "New Year's Eve," p. 434.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

And at once shatters
 into lonely (individuals)
 suddenly aware
 of the long pin
 the cold impassive clock
 is maniacally tap-tapping
 into their skulls⁴⁸

The Heraclitean fire of the universal process, as portrayed as a pure flame. In contrast to its purity, its colour, its fluid movements, and its organic origins, the "fires" of civilization are associated with smoke. In "Lachine, Que."⁴⁹ ". . . the skies/ crimson with sunset/ disappear/ into blast-furnaces . . ." ⁵⁰ The organic flame of the logos is slowly obliterated; in its stead emerges the mediocrity and uniformity of the masses. This purgatorial image of mass bourgeoisie is sterile. ". . . like a safe/ used by an idiot . . ." ⁵¹ its linear rows of houses, trains and highways act in sharp contrast to the cyclical and pregnant intimations of the crimson sun. In "Fornalutx"⁵² the poet takes the reader into this hellish environment. The stench of excrement fouls the air, the inhabitants (" . . . damned . . . ") ⁵³ shuffle on the street with ". . . checks made pallid by a vile sun, / And rotting matter under one's feet . . ." ⁵⁴ It is a place of perversion;

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "Lachine, Que.," p. 104.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Fornalutx," p. 256.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

"... green dust" "55. replaces the " ... green fires in
 the grass "56 the sun smokes, " ... And no air stirred,
 "57 " ... What truth did Fornalutx wish to say? "58

It expresses the truth of a civilization that has endeavoured to extinguish the cosmic flame. It is good for man to live under the light and fire provided for him by the universal process. His intervention has caused catastrophic results, he has created his own Hell on earth.

Most of Layton's life has been spent in Montreal. It is natural therefore, that this city has come to represent a symbol of human existence. Elizabeth Waterston writes in "Irving Layton. Apocalypse in Montreal:"

Now that Layton has left Montreal, both physically and poetically, it is worth taking a look at his work to date, to see what he has made of the city--and what it has made of him. In The Whole Bloody Bird, Layton has structured an entire volume around his sense of place. Notes or observations crystallized from his travels lead to a set of aphorisms, and finally spin off into poems; the whole process begins each time with response to a particular locale. So too, in the main body of Layton's earlier work, the process of poetic refinement--from fact to idea to poem--begins most often with a particularized sense of place. And the place, for the younger Layton, was Montreal.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ "Love The Conqueror Worm," p. 83.

⁵⁷ "Fornalutx," p. 258.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Waterston, "Irving Layton. Apocalypse in Montreal," Canadian Literature, no. 48 (Spring, 1971), 17.

Presiding over Montreal, set high on Mount Royal, is "an out-sized cross. Glittering with electricity, it represents for the poet, the values and beliefs of the populace that erected it. What ideologies, what hopes, passions, and emotions, exist under the outstretched arms of this mammoth symbol? In "Compliments of the Season"⁶⁰ Layton attempts to portray the lives of the inhabitants who daily pursue their business under the glittering cross. Civilization is decadent and decaying; a passionate lady moults at her dresser; rancid humans sprawl amongst the thorns, ideologies are carried out in bedpans. Cripples and deformities pervade humanity. Compared to this general malaise, nature is sweet smelling and regenerative. The April winds ". . . suck buds, blow/Greenness into the palmate leaf . . .";⁶¹ the sun forages amongst the natural phenomena, it has helped to create year after year with the coming of the spring. Like an animal busily intent on discovering what lies around it, the sun is renewing its acquaintance with nature. There is a pointed contrast between the sweet smelling trees and the thorns, the animal passion of propagation and the moulting and decaying of a passionate lady; nature is dressing herself in the green of palmate leaf; a woman is donning an artificial façade. Mount Royal ". . . slopes its green arms . . ."⁶² in a maternal

⁶⁰ "Compliments of the Season," p. 52.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

gesture; all of nature is creating, all humanity is excreting and discarding. The contrasts place man and nature on opposing sides. Humanity appears decrepit beside the strength of the returning spring. Mankind's soldiers are veterans, crippled by countless attacks. They ". . . lay their crutches/ Against the lighted cross/ That shines steadfastly upon the city/ With the faith of its shareholders" ⁶³ The faith of the crippled veterans and complacent shareholders is a poignant and pitiful image. The older, broken veterans and the strong business men who now rule the community are seemingly disparate. Yet they are joined by their misplaced faith; they live under the steadfast light of the cross which they hope will protect them from the opposition and tension of life. The cross has replaced the diurnal sun for the veterans and the shareholders. In its stead they have erected a symbol of their own divinity, and misplaced the true divinity of the universe.

In "Winter Fantasy" ⁶⁴ the cross presides over the surrealistic nightmare of decadence and disease that explodes at the corner of Peel and St. Catherine. This cross ". . . inflames our city . . ." ⁶⁵ the poet writes; it is an overt manifestation of the values of mankind. As with the street-lamps, an escalating decadence is enacted. The ruined corpses and corpulent

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ "Winter Fantasy," p. 162.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

singers, who stumble and drag their tattered shadows along the streets; erected the cross, which has become a symbol of their own decadence. In return the cross propagates this cancerous growth, inflaming the city, spreading and sustaining the infection. Mankind ascends Mount Royal to erect the cross as a symbol of his aspirations. The cross reciprocates and plunges " . . . hideously through the electric air . . ." and turns " . . . into windowlights which glowed only through the recollection of a former brightness . . ." ⁶⁶ The cross is a second hand, tawdry, and inferior replica of the cosmic fire. Only the tall buildings, resplendent with glass, rising high above the explosion of green neon signs and auto lights, reflect the morning sunlight. Mankind, buried in the depth of the city, has lost the vitality and health of the sun.

In "Firecrackers" ⁶⁷ Layton ironically portrays the cross, wavering in the radiant noonday sun. Here the opposition of cosmic flame and human artificiality is explicit. Set side by side, the sun is at the peak of its strength and power. To the poet the cross appears as " . . . an enormous condor/ with outstretched pinions ready to take flight . . ." ⁶⁸ It devours the spirituality of the populace who erected it. Despite its large wings that shelter mankind from the anti-nominal tension of existence; its flight will lead to nowhere;

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ "Firecrackers," p. 71.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

It is a perversion of nature for its wings are pinioned, fastened by the arbitrary and unidimensional faith placed upon it. It is but a diminutive pinion residing as an impoverished replica within the larger natural circle of the sun.

In "With The Money, I Spend"⁶⁹ the "fires" of civilization, and the cosmic fires with which Layton associates are juxtaposed to portray a fundamental opposition of values. The poet acknowledges the expense, the risk, and the personal, costly contribution that each man must make in order to affirm the dialectical process of existence. Using images of material excess, Layton endeavours to portray the generosity which man must expend in order to glimpse the ". . . white light into eternity . . ." ⁷⁰ The examples provoke images of vibrant colour (" . . . I could adopt a beggar/ and clothe him in scarlet and gold . . ."), ⁷¹ oriental splendour (" . . . I could buy 4cc cycars for Korean kings : . . ."), ⁷² delicate and fragile beauty (" . . . I could leave a legacy of dolls and roses/ to my grandchildren . . ."), ⁷³ refined and rare elegance (" . . . expensive Turkish cigarettes . . . the most costly champagne . . ."). ⁷⁴ Only a few gifted and sensitive individuals possess

⁶⁹"With The Money, I Spend," p. 222.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

the necessary qualities to pursue such a life. Because of their limited numbers, they require steadfast courage and dedication to withstand the onslaught of the masses who would destroy such a fragile and delicate beauty. The values that these few brave and passionate individuals would uphold are portrayed by the image of a rarified female persona, with a
 "... fragrant body"75 " . . . eyes, velvet and remarkable"76 " . . . proud and beautiful head"77
 " . . . slender legs"78 " . . . golden delicate hairs"79 " . . . perfection of . . . lips"80 Such perfection and beauty is associated with the cosmic flame:

The golden delicate hairs I have kissed
 into fire a thousand times
 will blaze more brightly;
 But who will bend down to gather the flames
 into their mouth?
 Who will follow their white light into eternity?81

A dedication to these values will project the few into a vision of the fundamental truth of existence.

Contrasted to the brave individuals who would assert such precious and delicate values, through love, imagination and great personal generosity, and expense, are the masses. Their

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

anger, their solid denunciation, their passionate wish to destroy the tenuous equilibrium of the cosmic flame, is emphasised by images of ugliness, insanity, and brutality. The few against the many; delicate and fragile beauty against ugliness and solidarity; the fever of creativity against the inflammation of disease; feminine weakness against masculine strength; tender cultivation against devastating war; idealization against social dogma; the passion of love against the passion of desperation--these are the dichotomies, and they are summed up in the images of fire.

The masses are ". . . inflamed . . ." ⁸² with social justice and wait for ashes. ". . . That is the signal . . ." ⁸³ for the bourgeoisie who concentrate upon the death and destruction of the cosmic flame. At such a time, ". . . the man with the smallest forehead . . ." ⁸⁴ with the least amount of imagination and love, will endeavour to destroy the unity and eternal rhythm of the flame. Ironically, Layton attributes to these battalions, the ideals of brotherhood, and universal love. Yet the contorted mouths, the heavy, aggressive fists, the staring eyeballs, portray the real spirit and ideals that lie behind the attack.

The cosmic flame, fanned and lovingly attended by the poet can lead to a vision of eternity, if he will ". . . bend down

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

to gather the flames into (his) mouth⁸⁵ But the mouths of the Leninists are contorted; their fists are ready to smash the " . . . cracked hourglass . . ."⁸⁶ of time; the " . . . white light into eternity . . ."⁸⁷ will be destroyed and reduced to a " . . . thousand manifestos . . ."⁸⁸ Rhythm, unity, dialectical tension, and energy will be replaced by the ashes of dogma and mass mediocrity.

. . . all is common as bread
Now none believe in greatness,
The dwarfs possess the bridge(s)⁸⁹

Layton writes in "Poem For The Next Century." The bridge between the antinomies expressed by the image of the flame, and so tenuously, and courageously executed by the laughing, joyous poet-on-stilts, has been replaced by an arbitrary construction that stills the oscillating, antinomial tension of existence. The result is " . . . All fog, all hovering mist . . ."⁹⁰ The " . . . sick lamp . . ."⁹¹ of civilization presides, the " . . . Chromium . . ."⁹² light that " . . . Neither shines nor warms as sun./ Cunning eyes gleam in the

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ "Poem For The Next Century," p. 361.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

mark./ Points of light . . . "93 In a dramatic plea the poet
 posits his own conception of life and its relationship to the
 dynamic flame of the cosmos:

And praise the stellar night,
 The made-human infinite;
 In the burning cosmos find
 The lineaments of mind,
 The throbbing of space akin,
 To the heart and not alien?⁹⁴

⁹³ ibid.

⁹⁴ ibid.

Chapter VI.

The European Culture.

The poet's travels to Europe brought a disillusioned awareness of the broken ideals, warped values, mass mediocrity and decadence that pervades the European culture. He aptly terms this disintegration ". . . the shattered plinths of christianity and humanism . . ." ¹ "These plinths" . . . lie shattered and useless, their broken surface, possible stoops for doves and pigeons . . ." ² Whereas the wintery poems of Montreal portray the poet's moral comment upon society through the imagery of artificial and fluorescent light, smoking blast furnaces, sooty trains, and the lighted cross on Mount Royal, the European poems are bathed in sunlight. The sun however, begins to take on new aspects which are related to the state of the European culture that Layton observes. It presides over a populace of inertia, ennui, and gluttony. In the guise of tourists and sunbathers, their anonymous faces and desultory lives personify Layton's poems, and become his moral comment upon society.

In "Piazza San Marco" Layton intimates his expectations and disillusionment by his bitter portrayal of the tourists who daily invade Venice to consume the history of that city:

¹Irving Layton, The Shattered Plinths (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), p. 14.

²Ibid., p. 15.

They have already consumed the Doges' palace
 And it goes without saying the Bridge of Sighs
 Misery and a club-footed poet made famous.

This is Venice. This is Europe.
 And these are Nietzsche's "good Europeans."
 Tomorrow they will sprawl on the Lido sand
 Getting their legs and torsos tanned
 So greatness is digested. Saint Mark's lions³

The sun functions for these Europeans as a vehicle of ease and shallow beautification. Today they are tourists; tomorrow they will be sunbathers.

The poem "Sun Bathers"⁴ portrays these inert people. Even the title, which ironically indicates immersion with the sun, also suggests a water image. Gone is the fierce and passionate identification with the sun, exhibited by the poet in his role as individualist, dancer and weaver of opposition. The courageous and joyous affirmation of his own immersion with the sun, is replaced by mass inertia as ". . . they sit all afternoon/ or lie on mattresses, heads propped up . . ." ⁵ Turning ". . . from side to side . . ." ⁶ they capture the sun's arbitrary rays ". . . in the magical/ globules of oil they've smeared on their skin . . ." ⁷ They are anonymous, ". . . stripped of all recognizable distinctions . . ." ⁸ finding

³ "Piazza San Marco," p. 373.

⁴ "Sun Bathers," p. 394.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

33
". . . comfort and community . . ."⁹ in ". . . the myriad waves . . ."¹⁰ of the ocean. Knowing Layton's own personal participation in the sun, it is easy to read the condemnation that lies under the urbane and measured tone of this poem. The sun's rays are arbitrary; the sun is untouchable and far away, unlike the sea, whose close, watery proximity acts as a counterpart to the sunbather's ease and indolence.

Yet the sun has not changed. The flaming process is eternally recurring in a never-ending rhythm of flux and flow. It is mankind who seemingly changes the order of things, by his attitudes, his ideas and his values. Thus as the sunbathers turn from side to side capturing the sun's rays, it is this very endeavour to capture that makes it appear

". . . arbitrary . . ."¹¹ and ". . . far away . . ."¹² The poet draws near to the sun in his poems of personal apocalypse by his own aspirations, and penetrates its fluctuating mystery by his own courage. The sunbathers, made indolent by the ". . . subtle drug . . ."¹³ of warmth, and the ease of conformity, ". . . machine-conquered . . ."¹⁴ measure the sun by the

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

" . . . clear, blue-green, aristocratic sea . . ." ¹⁵ rather than by their own personal and unique endeavour. The sea fawns upon them, kissing " . . . their bared toes . . ." ¹⁶ the beating waves become the " . . . ever-renewed roar/ of defeat . . ." ¹⁷ because through their weakness, the sunbathers are drawn towards the ocean. Ironically the ocean with its high tides and low tides, with its undulating waves and eternal rhythm holds intimations of the movement of the flame. But this is the ocean's danger, for it is a clever impostor. Whatever similarity its motion seems to possess of the motion of the flame, fundamentally it is its opposition, for fire and water annihilate each other. The sunbather's eyes are always turned towards the rhythm of the ocean. Its repetitive waves lull them into a drugged stupor. Despite its seeming continence of motion and form, the ocean dissipates in " . . . foam . . ." ¹⁸ rather than the self-contained, amoral rhythm of the flame, the waves foray up the sand is exercised through " . . . exasperation . . ." ¹⁹ its waves break in " . . . cold white fury . . ." ²⁰ and its " . . . eternal appetite . . ." ²¹ is " . . . unappeased . . ." ²² Its noise

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

is a " . . . hissing . . . of disappointment/ and pain . . . "23
 the waves are " . . . broken . . . "24 teeth that " . . . though
 indignation and menace are in the sound,/ are more powerless
 than beggars on the quay . . . "25 But the sunbathers watch
 this impostor, this seemingly similar, yet subtly different
 rhythm and motion. Measuring themselves by the ocean's defeat,
 the restless waves are " . . . a nice counterpart to ease/
 making the idle day still more pleasurable . . . "26 In a
 stupor of drinks, warmth and hypnotic suggestion from the
 wave's " . . . eternal appetite . . . "27 and its fawning
 attention, the sunbathers are defeated by the subtle drugs of
 indolence, ease and inertia.

" . . . The Nice bourgeoisie/ and her husband/ sunning
 themselves/ on the quay . . . "28 " . . . the English visitors
 in ruins/ bringing with them the unmistakable smell of decay
 . . . "29 " . . . the Americans with their cameras/ the French
 with their Guides Bleus/ the Germans following their guide/
 from ruin to ruin . . . "30 " . . . the well-oiled bodies of

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 "Quay Scene," p. 431.

29 "Ruins," p. 424.

30 "Olympia Kaput," p. 445.

the sun-bathers . . . "31 with their " . . . sunglassed stare
 . . . "32 the anonymous female tanning herself to " . . . attract/
 one of the male flies/ buzzing about her breasts/ buttocks/
 and exposed patches/ of raw skin . . . "33 the sun bathers
 " . . . That roll or lie ruined on the beach stones . . . "34
 the German who " . . . sleeps on the beach . . . sunbathes . . .
 reading or sunbathing . . . "35 the " . . . ailing people . . . "36
 who are " . . . shrivelled up by the sun/ Into a fine white
 powder . . . "37 " . . . the earnest Dutch tourist . . . "38
 " . . . the newly arrived traveller . . . "39 " . . . the young
 mother . . . "40 " . . . a retired couple . . . "41 " . . . a
 troop of girls . . . "42 " . . . camera-fiends, sunbathers,
 fairies/ and friends . . . "43 -- are all so engrossed in the

31 "On The Quay With My Mother's Ghost," p. 414.

32 Ibid.

33 "Beach Romance," p. 409.

34 "Tamed Birds," p. 467.

35 "The Terrorist," LLN. p. 46.

36 "New Tables," p. 326.

37 Ibid.

38 "Euphoria," p. 428.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

life of ease, in their shallow and tawdry pursuits of pleasure that ". . . their delight in each other/ envelop(s) them like a sheet of light . . ." ⁴⁴ They are completely removed and excluded from the pregnant possibilities of love, imagination and contemplation; like tamed birds they are ". . . Mediocrities, fearful of danger./ From love the cloying destroying caress/ they seek; and ease not risk and adventure . . ." ⁴⁵ They have exchanged the natural, organic, rhythm of the eternal recurrence, for the "Repetition" ⁴⁶ of tawdry pleasure; the world passes for them ". . . on its well-oiled joints/ . . . repetitive, ignoble, useless pother . . ." ⁴⁷ They have become drugged by mass indolence, by the watery motion of the ocean; they have lost their individuality, their courage, and their creativity; they are sunbathers, consumers, and tourists, symbols of conformity, mediocrity, and decadence. They have tamed and stultified nature; the palmtrees ". . . look like upended erections . . ." ⁴⁸ parks abound, ". . . well-cared-for . . ." ⁴⁹ and correctly proportioned around which unidentified

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ "Tamed Birds," p. 467.

⁴⁶ "Repetition," p. 426.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "Euphoria," p. 428; also, "Repetition," p. 426, and "To Write An Old Fashioned Poem," p. 462.

matrons and wives wheel their respective dependents, safe from any grand, unforeseen, irrationalities of nature.

At an early hour before these Europeans have risen, Layton wanders into an empty market and intimates the direction to which such decadence is heading. The fruits are metaphors of human corruption; they are the sad and wilted manifestations of a former, greater reality. The ". . . coolness . . . / from vineyards . . ." ⁵⁰ is gathered into boxes; the orchards are a mere ". . . rumour . . ."; ⁵¹ the peaches look like ". . . jaundiced dowagers / in their white wrappers . . ." ⁵² The tomatoes flashing ". . . in the surrounding gloom . . ." ⁵³ are compared to ". . . the neon signs of lost American towns / you speed past on rainy nights / on the way to nowhere." ⁵⁴ This is the direction to which European culture is also speeding and the result will be desertion and death. The ". . . herrings smell more rank . . ." ⁵⁵ the flamboyant colour of bananas intimates the fruition of decay, the potatoes are ". . . a visible affliction of air . . ." ⁵⁶ ". . . The slow mysterious

⁵⁰ "Marché Municipale," p. 464.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

decay of olives . . . "57, fills " . . . the deserted aisles . . . "58
 The silence and stultification is complete; there are no
 machine guns, no rifles, no revolutionaries to " . . . squint/
 at the sun . . . "59 All will " . . . sink into a darkness and
 silence/ more vast, more final than Pharaoh's kingdom . . . "60

In Layton's European poems, where he observes the decadence,
 disease and viciousness of society, even the sun suffers from
 the neglect and carelessness of the swarming masses. Nature
 is amoral, and the " . . . garlands/ on their black boughs
 twisting . . . "61 " . . . do not know their significance . . . "62
 Man gives meaning to the universe by his actions, and thus the
 omnipotent sun, associated with Layton's fiery vision, can be
 as decrepit as the society that lives under its rays. In
 contrast to the sun's outline made lucid by each lacustral
 cloud ("For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation On Flies And Kings"),
 the European sun is " . . . wedged between two clouds/ it seems
 embarrassed by its sudden loss of power . . . "63 In the
 park in Nice, the sun actually disappears " . . . like a yolk

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 "The Fertile Muok," p. 28.

62 Ibid.

63 "End Of The Summer," p. 476.

behind the egg white clouds . . . "64 Its freedom and omnipotence have been diminished and it reminds the poet of quiet Mediterranean cemeteries. The dialectics once so gloriously represented are lost as it ". . . stuffs black leaves of shadow between the stones . . . "65 No longer a ". . . July monarch . . . "66 it limps across the beach, an enfeebled lecher, a neglected mistress. In "Ruins" it is envisioned as an old soak, who has lost every vestige of its former sovereignty:

The sun lies sprawled out on the Aegean
 as if high on marijuana
 or a punchdrunk old soak
 who keeps cuffing her with hot wet fistfuls
 each time she tries to move from his embrace . . . 67

Despite such occasional portrayals, the sun will always remain a vital symbol for Layton. However, it never again seems to hold the same dazzling impact, the same brilliance, as it did before the publication of The Shattered Plinths, the book that exhibits Layton's most devastating and bitter attack upon humanity. The poet has seen its vulnerability, and lost faith in its absolute power to order existence. The result is a poem like "Leavetaking:"

⁶⁴"To Write An Old Fashioned Poem," p. 462.

⁶⁵"End Of The Summer," p. 476.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷"Ruins," p. 424.

Good-bye
 fields, waves, hills, trees
 and fairweather birds whose blasts
 woke me each morning at dawn

So that I might see
 the early sun

Good-bye, Sun

I am growing older
 I must instruct myself to love you all
 with moderation

May you be as kind
 to the next poet
 who comes this way
 as you have been to me

When you see him,
 give him my felicitations
 and love⁶⁸

The inertia and decadence of the European culture is made more pronounced by Layton's own response to Europe. In "Olympia Kaput"⁶⁹ the solitary stance of the poet that has been evident throughout the poems examined in this chapter, through the observer/crowd dichotomy, is made overt. A lone Olympian, shirtless, could be identified with the poet.

"... Sunning himself on a slab of stone . . ."⁷⁰ he is driven from the very spot where Zeus crowned the courageous and individualistic athletes. In "Euphoria"⁷¹ the populace ignore the poet, his heart ". . . throbbing gladness and

⁶⁸"Leavetaking," p. 539.

⁶⁹"Olympia Kaput," p. 445.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹"Euphoria," p. 428.

love . . . my inhuman cries/ of affection . . ."72
 In "To Write An Old Fashioned Poem"⁷³ the elegant matrons and
 older wives also ignore the poet in his struggle to create a
 poem. Entering into the flaming rhythm of a fantastic tree,
 with ". . . leaf-lighted twigs/ . . . dropping their colourful
 odours in a blaring/ noon hour overture . . ."74 the poet
 attempts to participate with the rhythm of the universe; he
 is unnoticed, an unimportant figure in the midst of this
 pleasure seeking civilization.

In "North and South"⁷⁵ Layton understands his arrival
 in Europe as a manifestation of destiny. He is in a quasi-
 -paradisaical environment full of colour, movement and natural
 sounds for ". . . Each eye of mine is full of sunlight . . ."76
 It is a place for bold and passionate pagans, for pilgrims and
 for gamblers: ". . . my skin is blacker than that of a
 Moroccan/ who exposes his chest to kiss or dagger . . ."77
 he writes. In contrast to this excited and powerful poet,
 the ". . . generations . . ."78 idle ". . . on painted

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ "To Write An Old Fashioned Poem," p. 462.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ "North And South," p. 387.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

chairs . . . "79 Like their counterparts, the bourgeoisie
of the " . . . far north . . . "80 they " . . . sleep/ under
the tumuli . . . "81 of stultification, " . . . abstracted
citizens . . . "82 who lie with the " . . . grey ash . . . "83
of their own warped and perverted values. The poet intimates
the values to which he aspires. " . . . Each eye of mine is
full of sunlight . . . "84 this dichotomic vision is stressed
in the last verse:

Strange bivalve of time that fell from my mother's
womb;

by standing erect only I caught the air I needed,
head and straining feet holding the two halves apart; 85

Mankind must affirm the tensions of life, so brilliantly por-
trayed by the flaming sun. Abstracted citizens of the north,
idling generations of the south, however, do not understand
this essential concept. In ease, in indolence, in sloth, and
in weary indifference, they let the grey ash settle " . . . on
wrist and eyelids . . . "86 The noon day, summer sun of Nice,
and the dusk and winter of the far north are essentially
similar, for only through personal endeavour may man affirm

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

the antinomies, and these uniperceptual masses ". . . do not know their significance . . ."87

Perhaps the difference between poet and populace is summed up best in the poem entitled "The Sweet Light Strikes My Eyes." ". . . The sweet light of heaven . . ."88 radiates upon the sunbathers and the poet. We have already encountered the response of the sun bathers to this noon day sun in the poem "Sun Bathers." The poet however, is not mesmerized by the ocean swell, and does not succumb to the ingratiating waves that lap at the feet of the bathers. He does sweep the horizon out of sight, and the sea is a vast, white, unending, scavenaging pigeons. The brilliance of the sun and the roar of the sea ". . . overflow into eye and ear . . ."89 The poet sees the tense interaction of fire and water as:

The waves push the long afternoon shadows before them;
wind, sun work against each other for my maximum pleasure,
and the sails holding the serene fullness of a good poem
are blue and white . . ."90

This is his exultation, to affirm the tension of life and to find joy in opposition, even amongst the decadent masses of Europe:

. . . God, the sweet light strikes my eyes;
I am transfigured and once again the world, the world is
fair.91

87 "The Fertile Muck," p. 28.

88 "The Sweet Light Strikes My Eyes," p. 458.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

Chapter VII.

The Antipodeans.¹

The opposing values of society and poet exhibited through differing images of fire, is a subject that deeply preoccupies Layton. In "With The Money I Spend" he asserts that only a few courageous individuals may kiss ". . . The golden delicate hairs . . ." into fire which will ". . . blaze more brightly . . ." ² In this poem he is defined against the ". . . inflamed . . ." ³ Leninists who are ". . . closing in on us . . ." ⁴ The fragile beauty of the cosmic flame ". . . means nothing to them . . ." ⁵ ". . . They will break your arms and slender legs/ into firewood . . ." ⁶ In "For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation On Flies And Kings," the masses, ". . . meek-browed and poor/ In their solid tenements/ (Etiolated, they do not dance.) . . ." ⁷ are defined against the poet who, on a ". . . remote . . ." ⁸ lake, far from the ". . . moneyed . . ." ⁹ swarms and their ". . . sunburnt children . . ." ¹⁰

¹ "The Antipodeans," LLM, p. 26.

² "With The Money I Spend," p. 222.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation On Flies And Kings," p. 438.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

dances in exhilaration with the cosmic flame. This dichotomy is exhibited in the binaries of poet and city dweller, and poet and sunbather. It is through this alienation portrayed in such personae as the dancer of desire, the weaver of poems, the fool in love, ". . . a simpleton, / an ensnared and deranged proletarian . . .,"¹¹ the cripple,¹² the hunchback,¹³ that Layton is aware of himself as a tragic poet who must measure himself against the masses.

Through his understanding of the cosmic flame, Layton understands poets to be ". . . the conscience of mankind . . .,"¹⁴ and sees his role to be inflammatory, in which he must kindle the ashes of social interest through his writings:

When reading me, I want you to feel
 as if I had ripped your skin off;
 Or gouged out your eyes with my fingers;
 Or scalped you, and afterwards burnt your hair
 in the staring sockets; having first filled them
 with fluid from your son's lighter.
 I want you to feel as if I had blammed
 your child's head against a spike;
 And cut off your member and stuck it in your
 wife's mouth to smoke like a cigar.

¹¹"With The Money I Spend," p. 222.

¹²"The Cold Green Element," p. 170.

¹³"The Dwarf," p. 200.

¹⁴Irving Layton, "Poets: the Conscience of Mankind," Engagements, p. 46. Originally published in The Globe Magazine, June 15, 1963.

Give me words fierce and jagged enough
 to tear your skin like shrapnel;
 Hot and searing enough to fuse
 the flesh off your blackened skeleton;
 Words with the sound of crunching bones or bursting
 eyeballs;
 or a nose being smashed with a gun butt;
 Words with the soft splash of intestines
 falling out of your belly;
 Or cruel and sad as the thought which tells you
 "This is the end"
 And you feel Time oozing out of your veins
 and yourself becoming one with the weightless dark.¹⁵

Layton's fiery message is an unwelcomed foray into the drugged
 existence of the populace. Indolent, complacent, materialistic,
 and excessive, the implications of a cosmic flame are totally
 beyond their rigid conception of a universe in which the duali-
 ties are seen as alternatives rather than alterations of the
 same mode of existence. They live in a static world of
 either/or, in a world of reconciliation. Thus in "No Curtain
 Calls,"¹⁶ the inflamed poet finds the populace greedily await-
 ing his death by consummation, as a distraction from their
 boredom. In this poem Layton portrays the dichotomies of
~~fire and smoke that have already been discussed in a previous~~
 chapter. The poet identifies with the fluctuating rhythm of
 the flame; inspired by his ecstatic vision he joins in unity
 with the flames; together they dance and dazzle in consummate
 identification that holds the tense balance of life and death,
 bright upthrust and doomed devastation;

¹⁵"Whom I Write For," p. 78.

¹⁶"No Curtain Calls," p. 561.

the street waited for the gay sparks
to dance out of the window

run along
the roof, dance dazzle and with bright upthrust
doom with blaze...ah-h

INSPIRED POET CATCHES FIRE

Heavy-booted and ponderous
they raise retractable red engines to now
no more than a thin curl of smoke,
a cigaret whisper in milady's ashtray
--a frail contemptuous yawn of tired air17

The dichotomy of movement and heavy inertia, fire and smoke,
inspiration and contemptuous ennui, an emphatic existential
identification and the timid whisper of rejection, are evident.
Fundamentally such ecstasy is frightening to the populace;
with nozzles, water and axes the "firemen" seek to annihilate
such drama. The street, silently hissing, waits hopefully
for the poet ". . . preferably smashed . . . / to come leaping
from the house/ and stumble at their feet"18

In "Executioner" Layton sees himself as a scapegoat,
for a public who will not tolerate poetic innovation:

. . . We agreed without
fuss that the conditions of our lives
made mandatory the murder of others';
also, it was merely good sense
my death should go unreported
in the nation's press: could only provoke
unnecessary comment and by disturbing
one or two over-intense persons
snarl up the traffic19

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 "The Executioner," p. 160.

In "The Cold Green Element" the poet is hung at the city gates:

Crowds depart daily to see it, and return
with grimaces and incomprehension;
if its limbs twitched in the air
they would sit at its feet
peeling their oranges²⁰

Layton intimates the tragic position of the prophet-poet; only by becoming a cripple can he be a great poet; yet the crowds do not comprehend this, and like wild animals would kill one of their species who exhibits such "flaws."

This theme is reiterated in "The Dwarf,"²¹ where Layton examines the poet in modern society and finds him expendable. Once more the poet is an outsider, deformed and crooked. He has seen the butterflies weaving a language of ambiguity between the sunlight and the weeds, but modern man, having no desire to encounter the dialectics of an authentic existence, follows the rails, straight and regimented. The dwarf is killed because he would not conform and oblige his audience. Instead he followed the butterflies on their wayward flight into the sun;

. . . The dwarf in any case
was ugly and she who loved him,
mistress to a neurotic manufacturer
of sardine cans, herself had ordered his death
for, although she had favoured him
with her best pair of smoke-eyes, he
would not grow tall to her whisper.²²

²⁰"The Cold Green Element," p. 170.

²¹"The Dwarf," p. 200.

²²Ibid.

In this schizoid poem, Layton is both the deformed poet and the observer, the two personae that he most commonly employs to define himself against society.

In another schizoid poem, "Me, The P.M., And The Stars,"²³ the poet attempts to rouse the populace with his inflammatory message (" . . . a piece of coal . . .").²⁴ Civilization is caught in the frozen grips of its rigid structures; living in tomb like cottages ". . . marbling white . . ."²⁵ their window panes ". . . yellow with warmth and light . . ."²⁶ are substitutes for a piece of coal, a combustible representation of the fertile muck. ". . . At the stillest hour . . ."²⁷ under a flaming sky the alien poet launches his attack, and tries to explain a dialectical universe, where nothing is absolute except for the characteristics of flame, by a right-left continuum. The couple ignore him:

. . . The couple
had gone off to the delights
of copulation, having first boarded up the abyss²⁸
against the white and anxious faces of the stars.

In answer to the P.M.'s question the prophet-poet gives his message:

²³"Me, The P.M., And The Stars," p. 146.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

I met a sage, I said, I met a sage
 lying on his face
 under a despoiled berry tree who said
 God was slowly decomposing

decomposing year by year, leaking away.
 Little remains of him now
 except a faint odour that might be found
 in the better churches of the city.

He also said pity was loss of power.
 Someone had to tell the people
 what was happening; it's indecent to let
 the death of the last god go by unnoticed.²⁹

Mankind has lost his divinity; god is dying by the hands of
 his own communicants. The poet tries to present the stark
 reality of the universal process, its tensions, change, rhythm
 and energy embodied in the "...horrendous stars..."³⁰
 Society will endeavour to shut out this strange beast who
 prowls outside their doors, but Layton is omnipotent in his
 knowledge of the sun, and will remain to curse and scream
 despite their malicious and murderous intentions.

As a poet Layton is particularly aware of the modern
 poets who belch smoke instead of the pure fire of the logos.
 The jealous manufacturer in "The Dwarf"³¹ is an example of a
 modern poet. Layton gives the reader a sample of his poetry:

He was that fond
 Of his fucking blonde
 He had cashed a bond

Poet turned manufacturer. The times breed them.
 The real killers.³²

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹"The Dwarf," p. 200.

³²Ibid.

In "Hierophants" the ". . . vacant poet gapes/ And belches
calumet smoke . . ." ³³ amidst a sterile society of ". . . fer-
vent geldings . . ." ³⁴ a ". . . floundered penis on a
corpse . . ." ³⁵ ". . . the wealthy dunce,/ The evangelical
hick, the boor . . ." ³⁶ Their emptiness and frozen tatters
are a direct contrast to Layton's tattered and singed skin as
he affirms life in "The Swinging Flesh." ³⁷ Ultimately Layton
and the modern poets are "The Antipodeans," ³⁸ for the modern
poets ". . . curse the light that puts them into shade . . ." ³⁹

Despite the dichotomy of alien poet and indifferent masses,
all live under the same sun and are implicated by its presence.
Thus, as Layton observes the desultory lives of the bourgeoisie,
he is troubled by the relationship between them and himself.
In "Enemies" ⁴⁰ he writes of this implication and inter-
-relationship of mankind, whilst watching a young carpenter
at work.

³³"Hierophants," p. 214.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷"The Swinging Flesh," p. 101.

³⁸"The Antipodeans," LLM, p. 26.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰"Enemies," p. 168.

The sunlight
 on the white paper
 The sunlight on the easy

Summer chair
 is the same sunlight
 which glints rosily

From his hammer,
 He is aware suddenly
 of connections: I

Am embroiled
 in the echoing sound
 of his implement

And yet his
 awkward shadow
 falls on each page.

We are implicated,
 in each other's presence
 by the sun, the third party. . . .⁴¹

The young carpenter represents society; his love and imagination are misplaced, as he hammers nails into the ". . . framework . . .⁴² of his house. The alienation of these two personae is evident by the title and the carpenter's ". . . brutal grin of victory . . ."⁴³ The carpenter builds forms and enclosures; the poet creates poems to ". . . shatter/ his artifact of space/ with that which is/ Forever dislodging/ the framework for/ its own apprehension . . ."⁴⁴ The manifestations of their creativity become symbols of their differing philosophies, hopes, fears, and visions of reality. Poet and artisan wage

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

a tense, silent battle. The former portrays the paradoxes, riddles, insanities and perversities inherent in nature; he wishes to proclaim the tragedy of the flame and portray his joyous laughter and affirmation of all opposition. The young carpenter is ill-equipped to accept such discomforts, "... He has no metal/ gauge to take in/ a man with a book . . ."45 Thus he builds a wall around himself as a protection from the poet and the truth of existence that poetry portrays:

Over the wall
of sound I see
his brutal grin of victory46

Yet the carpenter's resistance cannot stop the poet from pursuing his lonely task. Thus the "... brutal grin of victory . . ."47 is "... Made incomplete/ by the white sunlit/ paper I hold on my knee... ."48 The third party in the triangle is the sun, which makes the two creators "... implicated/ in each other's presence . . ."49 Momentarily the two may be reconciled to each other's "... necessary existence . . ."50 by some sight or experience that awakens the same emotions of tenderness, joy or delight. But ultimately they are "Enemies," and the poet, an endangered species in

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

twentieth century complacency, will have to fight for his exuberance in life and for his artistic vision.

In "Death of Moishe Lazarovitch"⁵¹ the poet's father is symbolized by fire, not only because of his male denominator, but because he was ". . . the visionary, the mystic, the dreamer, the man for whom the Strul Goldbergs of this world were utterly contemptible . . . the measure of Strul . . ." ⁵² His death is described in apocalyptic terms, and the son takes upon himself the role of the father; not as the ". . . ineffectual visionary . . ." ⁵³ but as the fiery measure of the world of Strul Goldberg, and ". . . the world of my mother . . ." ⁵⁴ that seemed as if it were ". . . going to coalesce and that I would be crushed under the weight of it . . ." ⁵⁵ The young carpenter, the Strul Goldbergs, the modern poets, the tourists, the sunbathers, the moulting lady, the crippled veterans, the faithful shareholders, the etiolated masses, the Leninists, and all others with a uniperceptual and limited vision are the measure against which the alien poet defines himself; momentarily they may emotionally unite, but ultimately they are the polar points of the cosmic flame. The poet and the brave few--

⁵¹"Death of Moishe Lazarovitch," p. 87.

⁵²Irving Layton, Engagements, p. 66. Originally from "A Conversation About Literature: An Interview with Margaret Laurence and Irving Layton," taped by Clara Thomas, Journal of Canadian Fiction, Winter 1972.

⁵³Irving Layton, Engagements, p. 84. Originally published in A Red Carpet for the Sun (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1959), "Foreword."

⁵⁴Engagements, p. 66.

⁵⁵Ibid.

Onassis, Marilyn Monroe, Stella Ioannou, the Old Women, Mao Tse-Tung, and others--exist in a tense but balanced resistance to the swarming mass of society.

Layton has released a damning tirade upon society. In contrast to the poet's vision of fire, civilization inhabits a smoky and hellish environment. In contrast to the weaving, dancing, tottering flame-like poet, the populace is portrayed in images of social and spiritual rigidity. The indolent sun-bathers, who like blackened lumps of tar accept the sun's rays in passive surrender, gradually lose all identity and personal awareness. The heavy and ponderous firemen, the contorted and heavy fisted Leninists, the masses, etiolated, who do not dance, the tomb-like city of "Spikes" --all these images act in emphatic contrast to the exuberant poet who swings in harmony with the cosmic flame. In some poems the masses passively enjoy the sun, in others they remain buried in darkened streets; in "Excursion"⁵⁶ docile soldiers, and other passengers, a conglomeration of liars, trivia, and excursionists, sit in a sealed train as they pass through the ". . . fire lands . . ." ⁵⁷ Sometimes the populace walk in well-ordered parks, sometimes they move in ". . . ritual dance . . ." ⁵⁸ their smoking limbs reducing Dionysian ecstasy to studied and careful form. Sometimes they dance in demoniac chaos, amidst the rotting offal

⁵⁶"Excursion," p. 10.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸"Everywhere The Stink," p. 294.

and excrement of their own imposed, hellish environment, grimacing, keeling over into cauldrons, their bodies ". . . bubbled like over-heated tar . . ." ⁵⁹ Some are ". . . pinched, some manacled/ whipped by devils . . ." ⁶⁰ Unlike Layton's joyous dance of affirmation, this heaving mass is ". . . ever-dissolving, ever-congealing . . ." ⁶¹ The heat arises from gas, boiling water, fiery bricks, over-heated tar, burning shit, and rotting offal.

In such poems the ordered flux and flow of the universe appears to have become a heaving, chaotic mass, for the sun has lost its power to guide and civilization has gone mad. Moulting, rancid, angry, inert, excremental, pallid, diseased, society exists within a hell of its own making, a hell of misplaced values, ideals, faith and energy.

Despite the horror of his vision, Layton does not give up his optimism. In "He Saw Them, At First" ⁶² he imagines that he can quell the fiery hell by the gift of love:

He approached and saw one that appeared to be female
and drew her out of the circle of excrement-covered
figures, catching and holding her reeking arm
in its half-movement of violence

⁵⁹"He Saw Them, At First," p. 442.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

He said: let me trace your features on the hot sands with this glowing splinter I detached from a burning prison wall. As he bent down to begin his self-appointed task she threw herself on him and cried joyously: 'I love you!' Without looking up he muttered to the crackling sand, 'And I, you.'

The fires were suddenly everywhere extinguished and the gloom was rolled behind the silent furnace taking the tormented denizens with it. A clean fresh wind scented with far away seas blew through the emptied vaults; a man and woman were lifted like crazy petals the wind puts down in a field where magisterial leaf-laden trees give shade. I saw them stretch out on the grass and embrace, the flowers curling around their wrists, marrying them; a purling, cooling stream ran past their feet singing their epithalamium. ⁶³

Using a glowing splinter to represent the fertile muck of the universe, the poet recreates this demented and reeking female, and unites her once more with her origins, as he traces her features upon the sand. At her joyous exclamation of love ". . . The fires were suddenly everywhere extinguished/ and the gloom was rolled behind the silent furnace . . ." ⁶⁴

Nature aids the transformation with ". . . A clean/ fresh wind scented with far away seas . . ." ⁶⁵ A man and a woman lifted by the wind, move with the flux and flow of nature. Under the shade of a tree, they embrace, and marry; nature sings their epithalamium. This is one of the few poems where vision is enacted amidst the cooling and rhythmic harmony of water. Perhaps Layton intimates that civilization has

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

suffered enough; generously, he momentarily relinquishes his dynamic vision of fire, and allows the tormented and scorched limbs to be bathed and healed by a cooling stream. However, it was fire, in the form of the glowing splinter that precipitated the miraculous change that ends in love amidst a gentle and fertile nature.

In "End Of The Summer" the poet once more tries to precipitate apocalypse through the act of love. In this poem the universe is sad and has lost its heart--the sun burns less intensely and ". . . seems embarrassed by its sudden loss of power . . ." ⁶⁶ The waves support its waning, speaking ". . . in a voice not heard before/ more tumultuous yet sadder/ like people who shout at each other/ at the end of a love affair . . ." ⁶⁷ Layton intimates again the lack of love that exists in this autumnal populace. In an act of generosity the poet seems to take on the lost attributes of the sun; with ". . . bronzed chest and arms . . ." ⁶⁸ he tries to invigorate the failing sun, that now limps like an old woman, momentarily beaten and destroyed by the decadence of a Mediterranean culture and its own natural, seasonal, decline.

Despite the temporary impotence of the sun, the poet believes that the fire of the logos will expose and purify human evil.

⁶⁶"End Of The Summer," p. 476.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

I think the sun
 Has already begun
 To burn their futility and need
 And themselves to a brown weed.
 ("Trumpet Daffodil.")⁶⁹

I suppose one day
 The sun will black out
 And these creatures
 With their ingenious contraptions
 For perfuming and surfeiting their bodies
 Will die . . .
 ("Now That I'm Older.")⁷⁰

This is intimated in "Compliments Of The Season."⁷¹ The sun returns with the April winds of creativity and joins with them to vitalize a sleeping world. Despite the decadence and disease that pervades humanity, the sun and wind are strong and regenerative. Mankind's decadence is devastating and pervasive, but:

Against the curbstones like thick nostrils
 The sunlight begins to dry
 This snotflecked world.⁷²

The seasonal implications of this poem intimate the continual struggle between apocalypse and damnation that is waged between civilization and the sun. (" . . . And next April and the April after . . .")⁷³

⁶⁹"Trumpet Daffodil," p. 50.

⁷⁰"Now That I'm Older," p. 132.

⁷¹"Compliments Of The Season," p. 52.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

The image of the apocalyptic fire is balanced in Layton's poetry against the image of man's hell on earth--which will tip the scale? Good poets will try to tip the balance towards spring, creative winds and health. Society however, seems to be pulling in the other direction. Through sheer weight of numbers society may force the issue. The poet will watch through his improved binoculars--a fitting symbol to describe the unity of his binary vision:

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.

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.⁷⁴

This poem expresses Layton's vision of apocalypse by fire. Civilization is ugly and totally corrupt, using the devastation as a means to personal gain and self-advancement; they welcome the light of the fire in order to see more clearly their

⁷⁴"The Improved Binoculars," p. 139.

neighbour's destruction. This poem is essentially pessimistic-- mankind learns nothing and the war between fire and civilization does not seem to be resolved. Layton intimates that nothing is final, nothing is absolute. This tension, like all other tensions, is a necessary part of life and cannot be resolved.

In some poems, Layton, ". . . an indestructible egotist . . .,"⁷⁵ believes that he can change society through the redeeming act of love ("He Saw Them, At First," "End Of The Summer"). In other poems the reverberating flux and flow of nature takes up the task, the sun blacking out, burning and drying ". . . this snottflecked world . . ."⁷⁶ ("Trumpet Daffodil," "Now That I'm Older," "Compliments of the Season"). Ultimately however, in Layton's poetics, man has ultimate free will and the future can be as much or as little as he wishes, just as his life can be only what he makes of it. Layton warns, gesticulates, threatens, and storms, but man must take upon himself the responsibility of his future. He may choose his own form of fire.

⁷⁵"Trumpet Daffodil," p. 50.

⁷⁶"Compliments Of The Season," p. 52.

Conclusion.

The imagery of fire structures Layton's poetry. Through articulation of this symbol, the poet portrays a universal process of energy, rhythm, change, and tension. The sun, omnipotent flame, exists as the pivotal point of all flux, precipitating the unending metamorphosis of the cosmos. Man is portrayed as a microcosm of this universal combustion, inheriting the innate characteristics of fire.

Due to the tension inherent in the universal process, man must face the tragedy of fruition. The sun that nourishes and nurtures, also destroys in unending, amoral effulgence. Like the flame, all things arise and return to the fertile muck-- ". . . immortal coal of the universe . . ." ¹ Subject to the laws of the flame, man is vulnerable to the beneficial and destructive effulgence of the sun. He is ". . . time-infected . . ." ² and reaching fruition, must capitulate to his painful dissolution; ". . . seasonably/ leaf and blossom uncurl/ and living things arrange their death . . ." ³

Despite this linear, seasonal decline, man may, through a dynamic affirmation of himself as a microcosm of the cosmic flame, transcend briefly, his own temporality. Man must flame, but he may choose the intensity of his flaming, redeeming himself through the manner by which he lives.

¹ "Seven O'Clock Lecture," p. 110.

² Ibid.

³ "The Birth Of Tragedy," p. 121.

Furthermore, Layton asserts, man is not totally victimized by the sweeping fecundity of the burning cosmos, for nature needs man to give her significance. Layton attempts to dominate reality through the passion of a life intensely lived, and through love and imagination. This leads to the power of the victor, who simultaneously capitulates to his time-infected nature of fruition and decay.

In his attempts to dominate the ambiguous and enigmatic character of the burning cosmos through love and imagination, the poet encounters the paradox of existence and discovers the tragedy inherent in flux--that unity is a deathlike state and life is a continual metamorphosis of opposition and tension. Layton asserts that man cannot transcend life, but must reach a genuine resolution of tension within the fiery process of existence. Man must enter the very heart of tragedy, and encounter the polarities of the flame; through courage and passion in love and imagination, he may reach the "ambiguous" point of consummation, symbolized by fire.

Vision however, does not rest in love and contemplation, but in a poetic rendering of these experiences in metaphor and paradox:

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.⁴

⁴Ibid.

Poetry enables the poet momentarily to dominate reality. As poet he may become fabulist and give significance to nature. Layton conceives of poetry as an ironic balance of tension that holds the dichotomies of existence in a tense unity. The act of poem-making is the vital and dynamic means whereby the poet can express the riddles, insanities, and paradox of existence. This concept of poetry as the only and ultimate means to man's freedom closely resembles Nietzsche's conception of art expressed in The Birth of Tragedy:

Only as an esthetic product can the world be justified to all eternity--although our consciousness of our own significance does scarcely exceed the consciousness a painted soldier might have of the battle in which he takes part Only as the genius in the act of creation merges with the primal architect of the cosmos can he truly know something of the eternal essence of art. For in that condition he resembles the uncanny fairy tale image which is able to see itself by turning its eyes. He is at once subject and object, poet, actor and audience⁵

The sun exemplifies the ambiguity of consummation and leads the poet to the beginning and end of all understanding. Apotheosis in the sun is Layton's consummation as philosopher, lover, and poet. At such moments he can identify with its binary character, bridging the division with the woven carpet, the dance, musical cadences, a laughter in the mind, and the poetic stilts. The equilibrium attained through these devices is expressed by the personae of the king, the maddened god, and the warrior. Momentarily the poet himself becomes omnipotent, dominating the change and flux of the universe in

⁵Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, p. 42.

harmony with the sun. Defined against these potent and powerful images are the personae of the clown, the buffoon, the crippled poet, the quiet madman, the devastated lover, and desolate philosopher. Victor and victim, Layton overcomes his limitations and finitude through man's unique capacity to impose an aesthetic design upon the flaming tension of the universe, whilst submitting to his time-infected nature of fruition and destruction.

The paradox of the flame permeates every experience. Like the hawk the poet may soar towards the sun, yet, like the rodent he is caught within the talons of his own temporality. His final consummation in the sun is equally ambiguous. At the point of control, domination and fulfillment, he reaches fruition and must capitulate to his own seasonal nature; clown/king, victor/victim, the fruition of consummation is his point of equilibrium where all opposition coalesces into the intricate weave and balanced tension of binary vision and the created poem.

Ultimately, consummation in the sun is portrayed as an experience of beauty, for the poet is in harmony with the rhythm of the flame. Beauty is the antinomial tension of the universe, the bewitching, dizzying, tragic implications of the flame, life and death, fruition and decay, pain and pleasure, crucifixion and resurrection.

In contrast to the fluctuating image of fire that pervades Layton's poems of personal apocalypse, the fires of civilization are arbitrary and artificial. These contrasting images of fire portray the fundamental opposition that exists between poet and society. Layton attempts to dominate reality through existential participation exhibited through a love and imagination that interacts with the cosmic flame. Society attempts to dominate reality by brutal seizure, arbitrary intervention, and drugged indifference. Passion and joy are replaced by despair and a preoccupation with death; intensity is replaced by finitude; desire is replaced by ennui; personal endeavour is replaced by mass solidarity.

These opposing values of society and poet act as a measure by which the poet may define himself, for such tension is a part of the inherent balance of the universal process. Layton tries to kindle the ashes of social interest through his writings, but society ostracizes this strange beast; poet and society are enemies, existing in a strange relationship in which they are at once implicated by each other's presence, yet alienated by their differing values, hopes, fears, philosophies, and visions.

Despite the necessary tension of poet and society, Layton attempts to quell the fiery hell of social decadence, and precipitate apocalypse through the acts of love and imagination. Identifying with the sun, he tries to become the catalyst that will initiate metamorphosis. Ultimately, however, despite his entrapment within the flaming fecundity of nature, despite

his time-infected nature, despite his microcosmic affiliation to the macrocosmic flame, man has free will. Each man must decide for himself whether he will flame faintly or consume himself away in a bold and passionate embrace of life. He cannot choose the fire, but he may choose his own form of fire--hell on earth, or apotheosis in the sun; both hold tragic implications, but if he will choose the latter, he may redeem himself and employ suffering as a source of joy, exulting in his own peculiar and unique ability to invent and transform nature. In the words of Wynne Francis:

Man is always at the mercy of the inhuman forces of nature and of the irreversible processes of history; . . . All men are doomed to suffer. Yet the struggle of each individual--while it lasts--can have dignity if it is accepted with passion and delight. A man can even transform his defeat into a personal triumph with redemptive value for fellow sufferers by affirming his power to love and joy in the gift of imagination. 6

⁶Wynne Francis, ed., Selected Poems. Irving Layton. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), "Preface," no page.

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