

# Coming to Dalhousie

## Irving Layton — combining excellence and elusiveness

by Margot Griffiths

Irving Layton is one of Canada's most celebrated and controversial poets. Since the publication of his first collection of poetry, "Here and Now", in 1945, he has achieved recognition not only as a poet but as an editor, professor of English, and critic. He has published nearly forty volumes of verse and has established himself firmly in the footholds of Canadian poetry.

Layton was born in Romania in 1912 but has spent most of his life in Montreal. He has travelled extensively throughout the world, "replenishing his stock of metaphors" and shaping his experiences with scenes of far-away places for the reader's avid appreciation.

In an attempt to define and chronicle Layton's verse, George Woodcock says "to grasp Layton is rather like trying to grasp Proteus." The volume of his work alone overwhelms the reader and makes criticism or comprehension difficult. But for the reader devoted enough to plod diligently through Layton's prolific mass of poetry there is an abundance of delight and enjoyment awaiting him, for in Woodcock's words, "behind the many disguises, an exceedingly fine poet lurks in hiding."

In asserting the value of poetry, Layton criticizes poets who write merely "short stories arranged vertically on the page." Yet at times, Layton is guilty of the same offence. His poem, "The Cockroach", chronicles the "sad", "very sad" love affair between two people with a mutual interest in cockroaches. Although the poem is undisputably funny, it can hardly be said to "resonate" in the mind, but rather falls into the category of a short story in the guise of a poem.

A great many of Layton's poems have offended readers with their barrage of four-letter words and obscenities. But one must look past what is often trivial to find the real Layton. His treatment of sexuality is often shocking but there is also much in it that is admirable. He alternates between boasting ("My back is sun-burnt/from making love in the open air") and a sheer delight in physicality:

*I sang of thighs  
I sang of breasts  
and of curved lips  
from which kisses  
fell like rose petals.*

### POETRY CORNER

The following poems are reprinted from Layton's "Lovers and Lesser Men".

#### FAREWELL

She's gone. The one I swore up and down to give a Greek villa and six children if she married me, a trip around the world to the moon, Mars, Venus anywhere so that I could be with her so great was the fire in my head, in the sleeved arms that ached to hold her.

She's gone. The one that made me turn restlessly from side to side each sleepless night, thinking of her cool naked limbs curled up on the lovestained sheets, her red lips and long black lashes, her smiles, her pouts, her sexy gestures, the perfection of her small feet.

She's gone, whose laughter made me forget the decorum of grey hairs, children, friends, literary foes the importance of being Trudeau, Pompidou, Spiro Agnew or even the illustrious dust of Uncle Ho. Let the whole world be damned, I said and let the dead marry off the dead.

She's gone in whose arms I rose resurrected after the third lay; peace and wild joy and laughter were mine for awhile but she's gone, gone in a bus that with a snort has taken her far away while the grey dust that settles over me swirls and twirls like the ghosts of an empty day.

#### THAT IS THE QUESTION

In Skyros under a fine unclouded sky in the company of cheerful relaxed people who do not own a pot to piss in I am certain Toronto does not exist, being less real than vanished Troy or Delphi

Returned home to grey streets and greyer people who lock their hearts for safe-keeping in vaults and boxes and regard me with cold suspecting eyes I am persuaded Toronto exists and keep asking everyone why

#### TWO FOR ONE

When face to face I embrace you

are like a rose petal or delicate leaf in my eager graceless paw

But afterwards it is I who curl up quietly in your all-enfolding love

you my lovely Angel wants me to write not about her heavenly bum but about her soul

but when I think about her soul I am struck dumb

Layton's versatility is evident not only in his myriad of subjects and moods but in his fine craftsmanship. For Layton, writing poetry is an intense and passionate experience where inspiration sends lines to explode in his backyard and his muses batter him into submission. He is "the mouth", "the core" of all experience. And indeed, when he is at his best, he is the poetic genius he claims to be in "The Fertile Muck": "There are brightest apples on those trees/but until I, fabulist, have spoken/they do not know their significance."

Layton claims that a poem "should resonate in the mind and heart long after it has been heard by the ear." Many of Layton's finest poems contain a haunting beauty and simplicity which becomes engrained on the reader's sensibility, as in "The Silence":

*It grew from nothing  
Inside me it grew  
It grew in my veins and arteries  
In my bones and flesh  
It mastered by blood  
One day it curled up  
In my skull  
Under my useless tongue  
Now I have nothing to say to anyone.*

He curses women, laments their rejection of him, and yet reveals a tenderness that is vivid:

*No one told me  
the tumult of your hair.  
When a lock touched me  
I knew the sensations  
of shattering glass.*

Much of Layton's verse is politically and socially critical. Man can be a "noxious insect" who wreaks havoc and destruction. In his poem "To the Victims of the Holocaust", Layton raises a cry for the thousands of victimized Jews whose pain has been "entombed in silence."

*The devil himself is absolved, polyhistor  
naming his the only fascist in Europe  
ignorant you were changed into soap and smoke.*

Although pain and suffering cannot be negated through poetry, there is a positive element. "Poetry", says Layton, "by giving dignity and utterance to our distress, enables us to hope, make compassion reasonable."

There is much to hope for in Layton's verse. Behind the sometimes trite and truculent murmurings, there is a wisdom and a voice which cannot be ignored. His exuberant celebration of life is invigorating, his sensitivity is full of beauty, and at his finest, he is able to bridge the gap between imagination and experience to impart the joy and inspiration with which he writes.

Layton's many publications include *A Red Carpet for the Sun* (1959) for which he won the Governor-General's award, *The Laughing Rooster* (1964), *Collected Poems* (1965), *The Whole Bloody Bird* (1969), *Lovers and Lesser Men* (1973), *Tightrope Dancer* (1978), *For My Neighbours in Hell* (1980), and *Europe and Other Bad News* (1981). He will give a reading of his poetry on Monday February 16 at 8 p.m. in the Rebecca Cohn auditorium.

## LOVERS AND LESSER MEN

IRVING LAYTON

