

# an asexual interview with

By JOHN THOMPSON

Early that Friday morning which was to bring Irving Layton to Edmonton for a single, hectic day, I was picked up by Jon Whyte, representing the Edmontonian. We drove to Dianne Woodman's place, the McClelland and Stewart representative in charge of organizing Mr. Layton's visit. On the way we picked up Linda Strand, fanatical Laytonite and tape-recorder extraordinaire.

We then drove to the airport. As usual, that magnificent structure was almost empty. We drank coffee and made nervous jokes until the arrival of Mr. Layton's flight was announced.

One by one, the passengers came into view as they ascended the escalator: head first, then torso. We'd know by that time this man wasn't Irving Layton; so we didn't bother about the feet.

"That's not the Image," we began to chant after each arrival.

Then, suddenly, the Image himself appeared—a short, stocky, handsome, almost twinkling man.

We converged upon him. Introductions and bustle. As we walked out to the car, he explained, "I was at a party last night; I've only had three hours sleep." He may have been tired, but his vitality was still enormous.

While we were organizing ourselves for the interview, Mr. Layton enquired if Robin Mathews was "still kicking up a rumpus?"

We assured him Professor Mathews still flourishes.



"Good," said Mr. Layton. "You know, it takes one good trouble-maker really to make people sit up and take notice, and I regard Mathews as one of Canada's very valuable trouble-makers."

By this time the tape-recorder was functioning, and Mr. Layton was looking through the itinerary Mrs. Woodman had prepared for him. He noticed the building in which he was to read at noon. . . .

**LAYTON:** Math-Physics! Isn't that funny; you know, when I was in Calgary they had me give a reading in the Biology Building,

and I was wondering whether that was intentional.

And as I came in I noticed they were having a debate: Resolved That Adultery is a Social Evil. I wondered whether that too was directed at me.

It got up and said I did consider it a great evil, but we ought to have more like it.

**WHYTE:** Diane can probably tell you about the reading. She says it will be starting around 12:15.

**WOODMAN:** For three-quarters of an hour, Irving, and then you meet the students and autograph books.

**LAYTON:** That's good. Then we can see the results, eh, of the pitch . . . . At this point I don't know whether I am a book-promoter or a poet, or a politician, or anything.

**THOMPSON:** What's it like, having an identity so completely blurred as yours must have become over the past while?

**LAYTON:** Very confusing. Maybe you can tell me who I am and what my name is and what I'm doing here . . . .

**WHYTE:** Your name is Cain.

**LAYTON:** . . . because at this point I really don't know. I've lost my sense of identity. I've given about 15 interviews, and they all pretty well take the same form: what are my views on sex, and thinks like that.

And I had one reporter ask me, "Mr. Layton, why is it that every time your name appears, it's associated with sex?"

. . . it takes one good trouble-maker really to make people sit up and take notice and I regard Mathews as one of Canada's very valuable trouble-makers.

You know, it's about time that a process of de-legendizing was begun, because, while five or ten years ago I may have been writing about sex and was interested in the subject, for a long time now I've not been interested in it.

I keep telling reporters that I have other ideas besides ideas on sex—on education, poetry, Canadian unity, and so forth.

But the reporters, in order to sell their newspapers, always couple me with the word "sex," knowing Canadians, being the prurient creatures they are, as soon as they

see the word "sex" immediately read the column.

So I tell them this, and they listen very sympathetically, and I pick up the newspaper the following day and what do I find? Irving Layton says this and this about sex."

**THOMPSON:** Let's be the first newspaper in Canada not to run an Irving Layton sex interview.

**LAYTON:** You have no idea what an original thing you'd be doing.

**WHYTE:** Irving Layton on Nationalism!

**LAYTON:** Yes; my God, that would be a welcome change. Or ping-pong, or something like that.

**THOMPSON:** I don't think the world is ready for Irving Layton on ping-pong.

**LAYTON:** That's true, it's a dangerous subject. We'd better not touch on that. It might lead to all kinds of international complications . . . .

I was asked what I thought of sex education in schools. I said, actually it's asexual education, but I wouldn't object to it if they had some very experienced courtesans or geisha girls giving instruction.

**WHYTE:** You're giving a sex interview again.

**THOMPSON:** I'd like to do an Irving Layton education interview. Precisely what do you think can be done to improve the teaching of English in the grade schools? As it is, by the time one gets to university one's been completely ruined in so many ways.

**LAYTON:** There's no formula. All you have to do is find the right teachers and give them a free hand.

You've got to get people who like reading, who like books. It's a vanishing species, you know. But you've got to find them, you've got to look for them somewhere in the slums and alleyways of the world.

Find them, put them in a classroom, shut the door, keep principals and board members away from them, and just let them go on.

But actually literature is regarded as a conditioning subject, as a form of indoctrination into the values of our contemporary society. It's for this reason we can't get anything done.

I can shout my head off from today until tomorrow (as I have done) that the teaching of literature, that the teaching of poetry is poor; they know it, and that's the way they want it.

That's the whole point, it's exactly the way they want it!

They don't want the children to read Blake and Shelley and Byron and get convinced that something's wrong with mankind, or with society, or with themselves. Keep them happy, fatuous and complacent!

**THOMPSON:** So you'd say that no real solution can come through the system itself or through any Utopian sort of social change—the onus is on the individual teacher?

**LAYTON:** Pretty much . . . . For myself, I think I would destroy all the so-called liberal arts colleges.

The older I grow, the more fanatical I become on this subject.

The whole business of a liberal arts education is just wrong, really, it is just a prestige-getting thing. No real education is involved. I tell my students frankly, don't let the university interfere with your education.

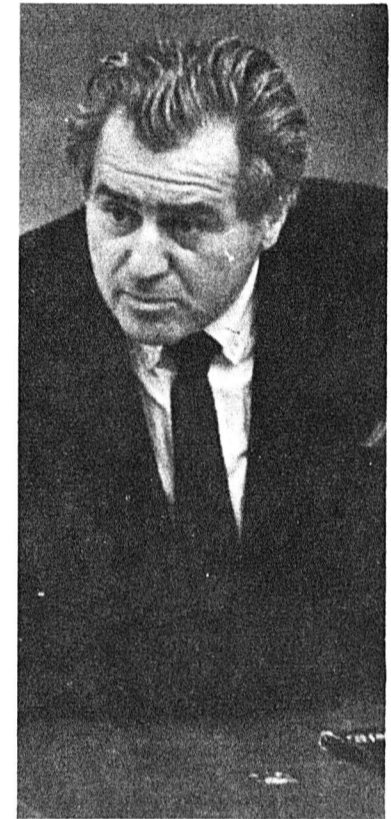
**THOMPSON:** How are you finding it being involved with the university, after all your published slams against the academic as poet and the poet as academic?

**LAYTON:** Well, you know, I've always been a peripheral figure no matter what I've been. I've always had one foot or one toe in the thing,

little to do with my colleagues, and my being poet in residence hasn't altered that fact.

It does mean that I'm now getting a living wage for the work that I was doing for fifteen years, not getting a living wage.

**WHYTE:** What do you think about the French-Canadian thing?



Quebec is the only place where any real vitality, in a cultural as well as in an economic and social sense, is manifesting itself.

and the rest of me has been out. Poet's-eye view.

That's been the situation at Sir George Williams. I've been there for fifteen years as a part-time lecturer, and I've gone my own way.

I have little to do with the administration, in fact nothing to do with the administration, and very

**LAYTON:** I think it is the most exciting and the most wonderful thing that's happened to this country.

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## this machine age

For fifteen cents  
the label read,  
the Virgin's halo  
would light up  
for three minutes.  
The man dropped  
the pieces of money  
into the machine's slot  
and looked about  
the vast, gloomy church  
empty except  
for him and me.

When his gaze came back  
to the halo  
it was still unlit  
—a dark infuriating zero.

He gave the machine  
a careful kick  
to bring the lights  
of the circle out.  
It didn't.  
"Damn it!" he shouted,  
"Why doesn't it light up?"  
He kicked again  
and muttered something  
I didn't hear.  
But I could guess  
from the way he looked  
he thought divine serenity  
a poker-faced fraud  
and himself taken in  
by the Mother of God.  
—Irving Layton