

Layton responds

Poetry says many things beyond the obvious

Before the campus is littered with Libbers prostrated by nervous shock and depression I'd better comment on Teufelsdröckh Concerning Women which Excalibur — without asking permission to use my poem — printed last Thursday on its front page.

To begin with, it's monstrous silliness to read a poem as if it were an editorial or a lead article. A complex poem will always say more and therefore something subtly different than its paraphrasable content. Since people mostly have their thoughts and feelings handed to them by the mass media, the ironic ambiguities of the human condition as well as the implosions these generate in the poet's mind are not for them. Living in an unreal world of crumbling fact they are more comfortable with the simplicities of physics or psychology. They're advised to leave poetry strictly alone: it's not for them.

Another caution: no poem can ever be considered fully representative of its creator's outlook on the world, his final say on people and events. Did the same Shakespeare

write 'As You Like It' and 'Macbeth'? Is the tortured sex-obsessed man who wrote the sonnets the same man who wrote so scathingly about sexual attraction in 'Troilus and Cressida'? It seems impossible to get across the idea that what's important about a poet's career is the dialogue he carries on with himself. It's not what he's saying to the world that the wise reader will listen to; he'll listen to what the poet is saying to himself — and the answers he gets back. Any poem lifted out of context of this perennial rapping session with myself is no more the total poetic than my finger is my body, though it be my happy diddling one.

And now to the poem itself. Had I entitled it Bullshit Concerning Women some readers — not all, mind you — would have been immediately alerted to the underlying irony that informs it throughout. Most students have an acquaintance with bullshit in one form or another but Teufelsdröckh — it surprised me that so few knew what the word meant or had ever heard of Carlyle who used it so tellingly in his Sartor Resartus. Okay. Taking man and woman for my objective correlatives — horrible phrase but it should ring a bell in some — I reflected on the antinomies of spirituality and form, intellect and nature, yin and yang. Traditionally these antinomies have been paired as male and female, Christianity from St. Paul on assigning an inferior, indeed a derogative, role to the latter. Unlike the majority of religious thinkers and poets, however, I believe them to be of equal value and assert it's the tension between spirituality and sexuality that gives zest and meaning to human existence. I willfully — that's my privilege as poet — described this beneficent opposition as one between souls and holes and made it as clear as I could that without 'holes' there would be no 'souls'. It's not my fault if people have been conditioned by their culture to react to the word 'holes' negatively. I certainly don't. This odd reaction is indeed part of the sexual hang-up Christianity must take the blame for, the latter being also responsible for the anti-eroticism, the savage puritanism that has crept into the various movements for the emancipation of women. Like any reasonable man I fully support the aims and goals of Women's Liberation; it's the sex-hating women liberationists that give me the pip.

It should be clear by now — or am I being too hopeful? — why I entitled the poem as I did. The existence of the antinomies, or rather our traditional way of thinking of them as male and female principles, may be only another lousy trick of the devil's, his customary maleficent legerdemain — in other words, DEVILSHIT. In the back of my mind as I wrote the poem there was the awareness that no one can hope to jump free of the culture that has nourished him any more than he can hope to jump out of his own skin. By introducing an ironic ambiguity at



the outset, the title enjoined a cautionary skepticism in our thinking about the oppositions, especially about our conventional manner of categorizing them in terms of man and woman.

The furor my poem created will have had a useful consequence if it makes some people aware of the dialectic going on in a poet's mind unfitting him to become editorial writer or propagandist for a cause and making business executives, trade union bosses, politicians and simple-minded reformers hate his guts. The truth of the matter is that he's not all that concerned with what hourly and daily appears to agitate the minds of his contemporaries. Their altogether sensible concern with rising food costs, social inequities of one kind or another, diminishing energy resources, or with the sterterous huffing and puffing needed to get them to the top of the economic shitpile, at any rate to find a comfortable niche in it, only in-

termittently will draw his flagging attention. The true poet, the one whose words will give pleasure and insight to posterity after most of his contemporaries are buried and forgotten, has an endless dialogue with himself going on which only the grave or the flickering out of his talent can put an end to.

If the editors of the special women's edition of Excalibur wished to flatter me by printing one of my poems on the front page why didn't they select Farewell, Stella, An Aubade, Inspiration, Two for One, Party At Hydra, all of them from the same volume Teufelsdröckh Concerning Women was taken, namely LOVERS AND LESSER MEN, published two weeks ago? Could it be because none of these poems, expressing as they do my profound aristocratic love of Woman in all her changes could be employed to make me out a male chauvinist pig?

IRVING LAYTON

TWO FOR ONE

When
face to face
I embrace you
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

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

when I think
about her soul
I am struck
dumb

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Letters to the Editor

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Who wrote that poem?

Gosh, would you please, recheck the author. I would have sworn it is by F.W. Nietzsche.

AUSMA STRAUSS

Not unique contribution

Perhaps Irving Layton feels that his poem on women (Excalibur, March 8, 1973) is a unique contribution to contemporary literature and thought.

It is not. It shows traces of a long line of decent dating back to the time, in all civilization, when the ancient idea that the cosmos was a partnership of male and female and the female role was a strong and honoured one. It was associated with the fertility of the earth and the male role with the fertilizing power of the sun. In that world-view the female role is not derided.

The female role became scorned only when man discovered his reason and used it to place himself on a par with the divine intelligence of God. That view is amply evident in Irving Layton but his views are lifted from a Hellenized Judaeo-Christian thought. We can find this influence also in the East... for example in the views of women of Nicholas

Berdyaev, who, borrowing notions from Russian Orthodox religion also despises the woman as "matter" and extols the male spirit as on a par with God.

An analysis of this reveals little else than a colossal male pride which has its origin in another ancient theme that believed God himself created the souls of men while their bodies were created by the lesser (created) gods. You can find that theme in the creation myth in Plato's Book of Timaeus.

As soon as the male discovers his "reason" and equates it with God, in any civilization, East or West, he immediately asserts his dominance over women primarily as a reaction to the fact that at one time in the history of the world it was the female force that was dominant and the male was afraid of it. With good reason. For the female does hold the controlling factor on who will be born to inherit the earth and the powerful force is coming once more to the fore today.

Layton may rant and rave about man and his reason. But it is not reason that will triumph if the earth is raped and dishonoured to the point of extinction, along with the woman. For it can't exist at all unless it is first born and fastened into a body borne by a woman. Nor can man's reason exist apart from the boundaries placed on it by the female earth.

Layton should ponder that for awhile. It might prove to be the inspiration for another and better poem.

CECELIA WALLACE

Irving will never meet God

One kiss on the cheek and you think that is a confirmation that you have been betrayed. My dear Irving, you will never meet God face to face and here is the reason why. A true creature of vision can walk into any synagogue or church, any Hindu or Buddhist temple, it really doesn't matter, since the God that all beings find, who truly seek, always

turns out to be the same One. A penis is a Gothic spire. A vagina is an Islamic archway. The body is merely a temple. We have all been men and women many times before. The temple we dwell in is irrelevant to the purpose and path our minds must take.

You will however be content to build and destroy temples; place value on that which is not important. For you woman is a "necessary anchorage", and because you have not transcended the illusion of flesh, your spirit will never soar beyond the stars.

ANDREW RUSZEL

Overlays of language give poetry many nuances. Yet judging from the response to last week's front page, few perceived the irony of Irving Layton's poem, Teufelsdröckh (Devilshit) Concerning Women.

Layton presented, in poetic language, an image of women long endorsed by western society. The poem's irony is evident. It is the irony that makes the poem's content all the more absurd.

The viewpoint, whether or not it is an expression of Layton's beliefs (he says not), is irrelevant. Excalibur published the poem (from Lovers and Lesser Men, McClelland and Stewart) not with malicious intent towards Layton, but to promote discussion of viewpoints regarding women in society.

We welcome all letters that address themselves to that point, but find no constructive purpose in continuing to publish letters that take the simplistic tact of attacking Layton. Such attacks are better directed at institutions and structures in society that encourage individuals to think of women as second-class human beings.

Those who wish to quarrel with Layton can do so by searching him out in his office in Winters college. But they would be well advised to read more of his poetry first.