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RAGING LIKE A LAYTON: A TRIBUTE (Review Essay)

Beissel, Henry and Joy Bennett, eds. *Raging Like a Fire: A Celebration of Irving Layton*. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1993. 252pp.

A few years ago (1986) Irving Layton and I were reading together at the Jewish Public Library in Montreal with some other poets from Seymour Mayne's Canadian-Jewish poetry anthology, *Essential Words* (Oberon). After hearing me read he said, "where have you been? You have much wit. Are you published?" I replied saying that I haven't been too ambitious about marketing my poems and that teaching and family take up so much time and energy. Not leaving it at this Irving responded, "call Howard Aster at Mosaic. I'll call you and give you the number." At the time I remember thinking that Irving Layton was well-intentioned and after all hadn't he responded to a letter of mine written in the early 1960s where he frankly told me frankly that my forte lay in prose not in poetry? But still I thought this was probably just well-meaning, idle, social chatter and would amount to nothing. So you can imagine my surprise when the following evening at supper the phone rings and the voice on the other end says, "Hello Ray, it's Irving. Here's the address I promised you. Try to get your work published." For one reason or another I didn't and let three years go by, and I was recounting this story to my good friend, Wilf Cude, who has a small press in Cape Breton (Medicine Label) and

he said, “let me do it.”

This is the genesis of my first and quite possibly last book of poems *For Love of the Wind* (1991) and I tell this story to show how Irving Layton’s generous spirit is obliquely responsible for my own poetic regeneration. Accordingly, I have much in common with the contributors to *Raging Like a Fire* who, in one way or another, have all been touched by Irving Layton and who, as a result, have their own anecdotes/stories to tell, poems, letters, memoirs, historical and critical essays and tributes. *Raging Like a Fire* pays tribute to Irving Layton through the contributions of Jack McClelland, Ralph Gustafson, John Robert Colombo, Moses Znaimer, David Solway, Roy MacSkimming, Seymour Mayne, Ann Diamond, Elspeth Cameron, Gary Geddes, Fred Cogswell, Mervin Butovsky, George Woodcock, Wynne Francis, Robert Creeley, Raymond Souster, Nancy-Gay Rotstein, Henry Beissel, Dorothy Rath, William Goodwin and Musia Schwartz to name but a few of the forty-one contributors presented here. The editors, Henry Beissel and Joy Bennett, are both of Concordia University and draw on the rich resource of former students, friends and teachers (Irving taught at Concordia in two different stages of his career).

In their introduction to *Raging Like a Fire* Beissel and Bennett call the book a *Festschrift* — “which means the reader is invited to a literary party.” The occasion is Irving Layton’s eightieth birthday. As such most of the accolades are predictably laudatory, full of good-humoured love and affection. One could imagine that such an occasion would elicit some very boring contributions. But Layton wasn’t and isn’t a boring man. Moreover, insofar as he opposed injustice and life deadening convention outspokenly and celebrated love, sex and the energy that is inherent in experiencing both life and death, his contributors here are encouraged through his modelling to follow suit, to offer sincere and truthful observation as well as heartfelt feeling. So the volume never sounds mushy or maudlin. Presented here are the thoughts and feelings of people who feel honoured to be invited to say something about Irving that establishes their connection to the man as well as their connection to life and literature. In fact,

Layton becomes their excuse, an occasion to generate some new creativity and it is through the special lens of this creativity that the reader sees Irving Layton. No doubt this context of celebrating Layton's life and poetry takes on some bias and some focused intention. As the editors say in their introduction, "Given his colourful and courageous personality, it is inevitable that Irving's reputation is not without controversy. The *Festschrift*, while honouring him, is intended to open new vistas into Irving the man and the poet, and perhaps clear up some misconceptions about him."

Many of these misconceptions are best cleared up in three partially critical pieces that deal with Layton's personality as it relates to his poetry. Mervin Butovsky in "Cultural Contexts and Self-Invention," the only article that places Layton in relation to his Jewishness in a Jewish Montreal, says that Layton "draws upon the memory of his origins as a means of self-exploration" (122) and elsewhere he says, "From his earliest poems, Layton's work has always depended on the forceful presentation of self—in all its protean guises—as the essential vehicle for communication," (114) and after acknowledging that Layton's "pervasive egotism" appears offensive only "if we fail to recognize its aesthetic use" (114) he goes on to say, "In retrospect we can recognize that Layton is a mythographer whose vast number of poems reveal a single myth concerned with the act of self-creation" (115). Gary Geddes extols the exquisite beauty and power of Layton's elegiac lines and offers a superb analysis of a line from "Keine Lazarovitch," "And the inescapable lousiness of growing old" ("An Imperfect Devotion," 20-24). David Solway, in "Framing Layton", amplifies our sensitivity to Layton and his poems by showing how Layton, being neo-Whitmanesque, creates multi-selves and makes conscious use of a persona. For me (perhaps because I teach poetry) these three contributors establish Layton in a fitting context, chief of which is teaching readers how to read.

The tributes too testify to how devoted Layton was to his students, to his interest in their lives, to his patience, listening and counselling skills. Nancy Gay Rotstein, one of Layton's former students when he taught at York (ca.1972), ends her contribution,

“Heart of the One-Armed Juggler,” with the line, “Irving collected us all and gave us sustenance” (48) and then transforms the man into a poem:

Greatness
for Irving Layton

Great old bear
you fooled them all
critics, interviewers
with your hauteur
and ripe illusions.
They dare not see
the soft eye lines
the gentle open hands
and certainly not the
heart
swollen and exposed
from caring.

Through all these essays, poems, anecdotes, memoirs — creative, critical and feeling human beings emerge, all somehow connected to his poetry and/or to his person. Layton himself has said that the travails and suffering inherent in living, which he calls “reality,” can be “dominated by love and imagination.” What Layton offers is a battling spirit, dynamic and vital. He is someone who doesn’t give up, who wants to be master, to conquer and as such he takes on life as if it were a battle. This posture would explain much of Layton’s arrogance, ego, and seemingly self-aggrandizing vanity, for the force of personality is created by the age one lives in and if you are going to be a poet, a very lonely often unheralded role, isolated much in the same way that Jeremiah was cut off from his friends, then one has to have a certain arrogance and strength of conviction. For one loves and speaks the truth according to the limits of his own seeing. At times Layton ironically sees his limits. His desire “to pole-vault over his own grave” gives some indication of a desire for eternal life as well as it indicates eternal innocence. But these are endearing qualities to most people who see we are living in a cynical age, an age that has

not sanctioned life as it should, that has held self and humanity in such low esteem. Thus Layton, despite criticism that he grandstands, wears the mantle of the prophet-poet proudly for he is the poet of truth confronting conventional mores, taking on the prissiness of a society that is masked over, that needs to become more authentic in order to function as it should and could.

This volume of tributes will appeal certainly to the many people Layton has touched and offers something to everyone: for example, there is literary gossip in Geddes' story of Layton and Atwood, Znaimer's memoir of how simple little first editions of poetry go up in price, and Souster's anecdote on the creaking bedsprings that so enthralled the sex-starved younger airman. All contribute a richly-deserved homage to a very colourful personality very few people are indifferent to. In short, this *Festschrift* is a good read—entertaining and revealing of both Layton and the writers writing about him. It offers many details of how Irving interacts with people and many of the anecdotes serve successfully to dispel the negative comments related to Layton's public image. For example, his abrasiveness and his apparent pugnacity are put into context as is his Marxist humanism. His socialism and his social distinctions and contradictions are also put on the line: He loves the U.S. but hates capitalism, seeing it as a dehumanizing and destructive force (Faas and Rombacco, 163-181).

Layton is physical in his poetry, forceful, vigorous and visceral, almost an athlete in words and the writers of *Raging* appreciate him as such, extolling his "militant" love of language as well as his devotion to both poetry and people. In "The UnCanadian Bard of Canada" George Woodcock comments on how loyal Layton is to Cohen. "The criticism of his friend Cohen, however justified, stirred him to anger, and rated at least three of his more lurid postcards" (109). Called protean by many, Layton has a far-ranging sensibility and loves life, the earth, woman, wine, and experience itself. His advice to a young poet still rings true. Roy Macskimming in "The Importance of Knowing Irving" writes about feeling very "encouraged and validated by Layton. . . . We went on to discuss what it took to be a poet. It meant living as richly as possible, he explained: not learning about

humanity by reading alone, but by reaching out boldly and hungrily for experience, and savouring it fully, before distilling it in your work” (16). In effect, a writer must live and register this living in his/her consciousness. So Layton works from life into words, the only honest approach one can have, for then language takes on true meaning.

I remember being amazed how successfully confrontational Irving was when he appeared at Vanier College to read from his new book, *For My Brother Jesus* and how offended some of the Christian students in the audience were when he attacked Christianity or “X-anity” as he was wont to call it. Butovsky (“Cultural Contexts and Self-Invention”) tells us that aspects of Jewish life and Layton’s positive Jewish identification is but intermittently revealed in his poems of the 1940s, 50s and 60s to 1967, but that the 1967, Six-Day war in Israel brought significant changes to his former universality and made him more parochial, identifying as he did with Israel and thus this new consciousness provoked him to condemn Christianity for all of its persecution of the Jews (124). Layton articulated his new mission to the masses in an absolute way. I remember thinking that these students needed more context, more history. Whereas the historian will explain and provide examples, Layton’s words, especially in the context of poetry, are designed to jolt consciousness, to attack complacency, to sow a seed of doubt in the xenophobic and self-serving, to abort the bud of racism wherever it may bloom. His later poems are full of polemical declamation, more direct, and even more offensive, especially to young Christians who have never examined their conditioning. Here we can see an older Layton who hasn’t made compromises, become too conservative or too complacently protective of self-interest. Layton keeps alive the vocation of poet as a challenger of accepted norms and rails against victimization, wherever it may be found.

In this context, special mention must be made of Henri Beissel’s lengthy (thirty pages) but solid dedicative poem, “Where Shall the Birds Fly?” Introducing this poem Beissel says, “this poem records the pain and the shame of one of the most brutal episodes in this brutal century of ours, agonizes over the

continuation of our mindless inhumanity, and raises a battle cry on behalf of the world's legions of victims that echoes through all of Irving Layton's poetry. It is only fitting that a poem on which he heaped generous praise should here be offered in praise of him. That the voices of poets shall never fall silent for 'In the creative word lies redemption' " ("A Salute to Irving," 129). Beissel begins his poem with an epigraph consisting of lines from the Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darweesh, "where can we go on crossing this last border?/ Where do birds fly after the final sky?" and lines from Layton, "Who today speaks for that singular remnant/and the desert revelation is gossiped from Moses/ to Jesus: love and creativity, freedom from oppression?/ I hear only cannons speak, the loud stuttering Uzzi" ("The Remnant"). At this point Beissel's pro-peace anti-violence poem begins stream of conscience and stream of political consciousness through images of childhood Germany, Holocaust, to Sabra and Shatilla, saying that the Holocaust is everywhere and that everywhere there is suffering and victimization and as such there is nowhere to go, nowhere to fly, for all morality, all decency has ceased to exist: "our humanity is/ an inverse function/ of the speed/ at which we pass/ each other" (150). And on another page, echoing Eliot's "The Hollow Men," he writes,

Is this the way the world ends
— in Warsaw and Treblinka
in a blaze of firestorms and furnaces
incinerating all that is gentle and good
— in Sabra and Shatila
in the glare of magnesium flares
lighting up the night officially
for a massacre of innocents?(151)

These lines and lines like "yesterday's Jew is/ today's Palestinian" and "Every refugee camp/cries out bears witness/ against us — in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Chile . . . in Jordan and Lebanon" and "The dream/ of universal brotherhood/ lies shattered in tin can/ shacks and cardboard tents./ History is wasted/ on a people who survive/ only to inflict their own persecutions on others in a single generation" (157) argue for a

change in attitude to the way we see ourselves and our world. Beissel would want us to learn a valuable lesson from history—that suffering into survival should teach compassion and empathy. To end war we must end all violence. Beissel’s idealism, so explicit in this poem about civilization, is rooted to a desire to change consciousness, in the hope that one day people will cease oppressing one another and themselves, that they will wake up and create a better, more sane world. This certainly is what aligns him with Layton. Yet I can imagine the stronger, less fickle mind of a Beissel, who feels shame for the way Israel behaves, taking issue with the Layton who took pride in Israeli *chutzpah* and heroics, who saw Jews becoming soldiers as heroic (cf. Layton’s “Israelis”), for they were not only defending themselves but all of the Jewish people. Beissel places himself strategically and dramatically in the centre of this volume and though he may be taking undue advantage of his editorial position, reflecting a self-centered, self-indulgence (thirty pages of polemic poetry is excessive for this book), he makes his political and very human voice heard. For it too is full of rage and fire. In any case, “Where Shall the Birds Fly?,” at times more polemic than poetry, is a moving poem. If the link to Layton is political feeling and empathy then it would seem that Beissel places Layton’s pro-life anti-oppression voice as central to his own being. This could explain the poem’s prominent inclusion.

Raging Like a Fire succeeds in allowing the reader to see many sides of Layton and even more important it allows us to see how writers like Beissel use the excuse of Layton to launch their own missiles. In fact all of the writers (including myself in this article) offer projections of themselves through their musings upon Layton. This is what makes the volume so varied and so interesting. Where a book of this type fails is in what it doesn’t do enough of, or what it doesn’t talk about at all. For example, a curious reader may expect in one whose life is so richly lived some mention from at least his latest wife, Anna, or some revealing anecdotes from his sons, Max and David. A volume of this type comes out of an attempt to make Irving Layton look good and feel good. And so it should. And though it’s interesting for all its

variety and for what it reveals about the contributors, *Raging* lacks some of the fire that Layton himself can generate. Perhaps some blaze could have been kindled by a juicy anecdote from Layton's close friend, Leonard Cohen, if only to get some of that flavour of "dancing the *freilach* at the Fourpenny." And wouldn't it be appropriate to hear from another poet, Miriam Waddington, who could have made some distilled comment on the poetry evenings in Cote St. Luc where Layton used to live? Disappointing also are the seemingly disconnected poems of Geddes, Mayne and Sommer. Though the poems are excellent in themselves, one can wonder just what connection they have to this volume. I can only surmise that influence, either in technique or form, is the tentative thread that ties them into *Raging*. I would also have wanted to see more prose or anecdotes from Seymour Mayne, who has worked so closely with Layton. Despite these shortcomings (based more on fantasy than fact), the book works well and the reader is left with a warm glow, fully appreciative of Irving Layton's life and poetry.

At times, the plethora of contributors to *Raging Like a Fire* blur together. But then this is a problem with any anthology read at one or two sittings. *Raging* is the kind of book that benefits a piecemeal reading. But read sporadically or not, the poems and the man blend together, complementing one another. And his friends, peers, ex-students and fellow poets are full of appreciation, responsive to both Layton, the man, and to the felt and perceived truths of his poetry. As such *Raging Like a Fire* is an uplifting book permeated like shot silk with the spirit and energy of Irving Layton.