

# Irving's Women: A Feminist Critique of the Love Poems of Irving Layton

*Joanne Lewis*

## *Brief to Irving*

*I open your latest book  
of eighty-two poems  
another blitzkreig  
and see you're taking up the cudgels  
against another wife:  
I wonder how she's taking it?  
I see. She's leaking headaches  
trembling in corners  
already  
and she's only had two years of you.  
The reason, perhaps, appears on page 75  
you squirm over your neighbour's crotch. . . .*

*After twenty years I am still angry  
I will say it for us all  
Faye, Aviva, Harriet, myself:  
We're not, Irving, merely strumpets  
for your pleasure;  
we're almost numerous enough  
your wives  
to unionize, vote you out  
if you think that makes poetry  
you've got another wife coming. . . .*

—Boschka Layton, unpublished poem

For more than four decades, Irving Layton's poetry has dazzled, puzzled, astonished, and outraged its readers. Not content to let his work speak for itself, Layton has chosen the role of public poet, taking and making every opportunity to voice his opinion and hurl his invective at the universe in general, and at Canadian society in particular. Many of Layton's more than forty published volumes of poetry are prefaced by scathing attacks on those who would shackle a poet's imagination; over the years he has used the media and the lecture hall to passionately and publicly decry social injustice. But perhaps his loudest and most sustained protest has been against a restrictive puritanism that inhibits the celebration and expression of human sexuality.

Hundreds of Layton's poems are written for and about women. More than one volume of his love poems is dedicated to Miss Benjamin, a grade six teacher, who, according to Layton, awakened his erotic impulses and inspired the "horny pre-adolescent" to write his first sensual poem.<sup>1</sup>

Layton's love poetry however, is neither a celebration of women nor an enduring tribute to the women who have touched his life; yet to call his poetry sexist, to brand him a male chauvinist and leave it at that, does little but to state the obvious. A close examination of Layton's work, applying some of the theories of feminist criticism, reveals his immature attitude toward women and sex, and his belief that men are superior, both physically and intellectually, to women. It also exposes Layton as a misogynist, with a particular hatred and fear of the woman artist.

In Layton's prefaces and introductions to his work, in his letters and interviews, the public Layton has as much to say about women as Layton the poet. His real life relationships with women speak volumes more, and the women themselves have not been silent. Should a critical analysis of Layton's poetry draw on these extraneous factors rather than make a conscious attempt to separate the life of the poet from his poems? A feminist critique makes it imperative that such a separation does not take place. As Sandra Gilbert articulates eloquently in her essay "What do Feminist Critics Want?", an essential element in a feminist critique of literary texts is to decode and demystify the disguised questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psychosexual identity and cultural authority;<sup>2</sup> to these I would add, in the case of Layton, connections between Layton-the-man, as evidenced by his life and his public self, and Layton-the-artist, as expressed in his poetry.

Why Layton writes about women is simply put in his forward to *Love Poems*: he is turned on by them. While other poets, like Wordsworth, for instance, are inspired by daffodils, Layton treasures "the sight of firm-titted women walking on Avenue Road or St. Catherine St.." He is quick to point out that, like Wordsworth who did not pluck every daffodil he celebrated, he (Layton) has not plucked every woman for which he has written the poems which "lay gratefully between the covers of the book." He goes on to say that Miss Benjamin, "the fleshly incarnation of . . . desire" has been reincarnated in all women he

---

<sup>1</sup> Irving Layton, foreward, *The Love Poems of Irving Layton* (Toronto: McClelland, 1980) n. pag. Further references to this volume will be indicated by the abbreviation LP.

<sup>2</sup> In Elaine Showalter ed., *The New Feminist Criticism* (London: Virago, 1986) 36.

has known since then. What he has left unsaid, but what is clear to a careful reader of his work, is that, for him, women and sex are synonymous. Layton acknowledges, too, that his love poems could just as easily be called hate poems "for surely love and hate are two sides of the coin we call sexual interest or desire". He attributes his ability to capture the "glory and carnage of the love emotion" to his personal knowledge of the "agony and exaltation" of love. An examination of Layton's poetry for the juxtaposition of images of violence and death with images of women and sex, moreover, exposes a thinking which goes beyond the romantic idea of the agony and ecstasy of love.

Layton insists that all words in the English language should be available to the writer, and asserts that there can indeed be beauty, power and majesty in vulgarity. In this regard Layton played a crucial role in transforming Canadian standards.<sup>3</sup> But the language of Layton's poetry does more than break the puritan embargo on writing about sexuality in sexually explicit terms; it degrades both women and human sexuality.

A recurring negative image of woman in Layton's poetry presents the female as minus male. The theory of penis envy which underlies Freud's psychology of women had led to the erroneous, but widely held, idea that men are uniquely qualified to supplement woman's lack and to fill the void which the absence of a penis has created in the female anatomy. It is expected that woman, in turn, will show her gratitude by submissiveness. In "The Tamed Puma," Layton writes: "I plug the void with my phallus /and making love on bed or carpet / we transfigure pitchblack nothingness / into a tamed puma whose whiskers / we stroke between enrapturing kisses" (*LP* 108-09). Here the vagina is not only a void, a nothingness, but the vulva becomes a carnivorous animal tamed for the moment by the stroking phallus. Layton subscribes to a masculinist ethos that woman's highest purpose is as a receptacle for the omnipotent sperm. A lover's art, according to him in "A Roman Jew to Ovid," is to "pump seed into her sweetest parts," for "women are mystics / that semen tranquillizes" ("Beach Acquaintance").<sup>4</sup> Unpoetically, Layton reinforces the sentiment with this insult he roared at Margaret Atwood at a poetry reading: "Women are only good for screwing, men are good for screwing plus!" (Cameron 372).

In addition to being presented as a void to be plugged, female genitalia are also depicted as dirty and repulsive. He

<sup>3</sup> Elsbeth Cameron, *Irving Layton: A Portrait* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1985) 404.

<sup>4</sup> *The Collected Poems of Irving Layton* (Toronto: McClelland, 1971) 328, 432. Further references to this volume will be abbreviated as *CP*.

writes of "hairy, black-pit vaginas" ("Sourwine Sparkle" CP 500) and in "The Pit" (CP 498) he warns man that his inevitable end is to be "gulled / by a woman's insatiable / vulva." "Women are hysterical idiots / whose holes smell of herring," he writes in "Pilgrim" (CP 429) and "life's a cess in woman's lovely crotch" ("August Strindberg").<sup>5</sup> The vagina or the vulva (Layton rarely distinguishes between the two) are also referred to as a "dark, dank grove," a "hairy monster," a "passion-moist nest," and, less imaginatively, as a wet snatch, a ditch, a naked twat, a crease, a cockmuff, and a cunt, to name a few of Layton's more popular metaphors.

While denigrating female genitalia, Layton elevates the phallus to god-like status and celebrates the power and "magical touch of the extended phallus" ("Sourwine Sparkle" CP 500). The poet calls for woman to join in the celebration. In "Man and Wife" he writes: "my attentive phallus / prods her and points her to the stars. / Rejoice, O woman, in the pointer!" (CP 364). Layton's belief in penis power often manifests itself in "penis as weapon" imagery. While some of Layton's phallic stabbings appear relatively harmless—"I impale you on your rumped bed" ("Modern Love" CP 204), or "I plunge like a corkscrew / into her softness" ("Woman" CP 208)—many display more violence; in "Thoughts in the Water" Layton writes:

I feel  
her deep vibrations as if a seaplane  
had plunged his ruinous shadow  
like a sword through her coiling body. (CP 25)

In "Lust" the phallic stabbing becomes a death wish—the verbal representation of a snuff film:

I could stab  
you  
with it,  
plunging it again  
and again  
into the vile softness  
of your body  
that I might see  
your eyes glaze up  
with death  
as once with sex. (CP 285)

<sup>5</sup> Irving Layton, *The Gucci Bag* (Toronto: McClelland, 1983) 54. Further references to this volume will be abbreviated as *GB*.

Layton brings sex, violence and death together in a shockingly repulsive way that expresses a fear and a hatred of women and an obscene desire to dominate them. In "The Sparks Fly," Layton lists some of the things that provoke him into writing. His muses include "wives, womenfriends" and the "orgasmless women of Hampstead." "Their everyday politics / is diseased sex," he says, and it is "out of their crushed limbs / I also make poems" (CP 76-77). In "Poet and Woman," he acknowledges, not unlike many poets, that hurt and pain stir his creative impulses, but his imagery is particularly violent: "I sing loudest when my throat is cut." Woman is his muse and his executioner.

I handed her the razorblade  
 she lovingly slashed my throat with.  
 After, when she was sluicing the blood  
 into the enamelled urn  
 my sorrow was that I could not thank her.

Once again he links violence and death with sex; in this case, his "greatest poem" is a celebration of the phallus: "the one she sings to the hairy Cyclops on her bed."<sup>6</sup> In the sacrificial killing in this poem, the throat slashed lovingly and the blood gathered in an urn are rituals reserved for the male victim. Not so for the woman in "Portrait of Nolady." The poet wonders what he can do with a woman who shows the poetry he writes for her to her other lovers to make them jealous. In addition to erasing her identity by denying her a name (nolady), he notes: "I could have her whipped; / with a safety razor / slash deep red trenches / from welt to welt" (CP 287). In "Modern Lyric," another traitress meets an untimely death while making love. In a field where "skulls were bashed" and "blood had made its own gutters," the poet pulled his "girl" down and, as he held her head and kissed her eyes, "slashed the traitress' neck veins" (CP 459). In "The Worm," Layton once again combines images of sex and death, prompted in this instance, by the poet's jealousy. Knowing his lover lies

whimpering in another man's  
 arms  
 I picture you stretched out,  
 a stiffened corpse  
 and your cold vagina  
 extruding  
 a solitary pink  
 worm. (LP 71)

<sup>6</sup> All these quotations are from "Poet and Woman," CP 107.

Many of Layton's poems show a double standard at work when sex is involved, and often his attack on the unfaithful or lustful woman involves a distorted variation on the theme of male phallus/female void. When he is overcome with passion, his penis fills the void; when the passion is hers and the penis is not his, the woman's vagina becomes an orifice which extrudes a worm (in the case of an unfaithful lover) or in "He Saw Them, At First," he writes of "lustful women whose vaginas were nests / from which mice scampered out from time to time" (CP 442). There are countless other instances of sex/death imagery in Layton's poetry—he sums up this juxtaposition himself in "The Camera Eye." Life's gross indecencies are, according to him, "killing & fucking" (GB 98).

Since, according to Layton, "women are only good for screwing," his physical description of women is particularly gross when the poem is not specifically about "screwing." "Women are repulsive mammals / without souls" whose bodies, at fifty, are "misshapen and sexless" and whose faces are either a "blob of painted flesh," "warped leather," or "a warp in the void" ("Three on a Park Bench" (CP 518). He describes "a middle-aged harpy" as a "hunk of powdered and perfumed meat" in "At Desjardins" (CP 261). Male supremacy and power are complete in "Everything in the Universe Has Its Place." Woman, when "no longer loved" and her body "no longer desired," becomes a "heavy insupportable weight," its "orifices useless," to be "dragged from room to room" (GB 33) by the poet.

Feminist writer Eva Figes argues that the idea of submission is inherent in the way we make love, man on top, woman underneath.<sup>7</sup> If power structures replicate coital postures, it is interesting to observe the male's position in several of Layton's poems: "My back's sunburnt / from so much love-making" ("Look the Lambs Are All Around Us!"), "Cythera all night / at my silvered back" ("Song for a Late Hour"), "letting my squat body pin you to the ground" ("Dans Le Jardin"), all suggest the man on top.<sup>8</sup> When the position is reversed, "she rode me like Joan of Arc," the woman on top is seen as an anomaly—the poem is titled "A Strange Turn" (CP 100). The woman as Joan of Arc recalls a female who wore "male" clothing and is associated with human traits of bravery, courage and valour, qualities which men have traditionally appropriated as "masculine" characteristics.

<sup>7</sup> *Patriarchal Attitudes*, cited by K.K. Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 46.

<sup>8</sup> See CP 134, 30, 216.

Layton's fear of women is displayed in his poetry through images which portray the female as destructive and castrating. "And why is it / when woman says, / 'I love you' / her mouth begins / to work curiously / as if she were getting ready / for a meal?" he asks in "Questions" (CP 269). He uses insect imagery often in this regard. Stung awake by a mosquito, the poet says to his lover "my first thought / is of you" ("Nocturne" CP 531). In a poem to one of his wives, "For Aviva, Because I Love Her," he describes himself as a huge bee being picked apart and devoured by a "voluptuous spider" (CP 34). In "When Hourly I Praised," the poet decries the fact that his lover's lips have been forged by Satan "to singe my wings, / to crisp me like a moth" (GB 36). A woman's thighs are "knives in my temples" in "Eros" (CP 90), and the castrating "Woman in the Square" dispatches the bellhop with "her blade-like arm" (CP 144). In another violently crude poem, "Mr. Ther-apis," Layton attempts to equate what he saw as the sterility of middle-class married males with primitive Greek rites; he depicts a wife castrating her husband (Cameron 234). As he explored his own situation involving two of his wives in letter after letter to Desmond Pacey and others, he launched into diatribes expostulating about D.H. Lawrence's warnings to males against castration by females, sounding more Lawrencian than Lawrence (Cameron 286). In his often quoted foreword to *A Red Carpet for the Sun*, the collection of poems which won him the Governor General's award for poetry, Layton blames "modern women . . . cast in the role of furies striving to castrate the male" for rendering the "male's creative role of revelation superfluous."<sup>9</sup> Dorothy Rath, a woman with whom he cultivated a long letter-writing relationship, reiterates her agreement with Layton's idea of the castrating female. In a letter to Layton, she says: "Women instinctively want to look up to their men but sadly many of them cut them down to their own size after they get them. As you say, they castrate them."<sup>10</sup>

Language is a powerful human tool, and feminist critics have begun to ask what role it plays in maintaining and perpetuating existing social structures and what contribution it makes to a sexist world view.<sup>11</sup> The idea of male superiority and female inferiority is reinforced by male/dominant and female/muted linguistic positions. Layton displays a poet's belief in the power of words. In "The Tamed Puma" he shows how words can be used constructively: "I place on the brow of every woman I love / a crown made from the choicest words; / I dress her like a

<sup>9</sup> Irving Layton, foreword, *A Red Carpet for the Sun* (Toronto: McClelland, 1959) n. pag.

<sup>10</sup> Irving Layton and Dorothy Rath, *An Unlikely Affair* (Oakville: Mosaic, 1980) 135.

<sup>11</sup> Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge, 1985) 51.

woodland queen / in trope and metaphor" (LP 108). A poet's words can just as easily be used destructively. In "Vita Aeterna," when a "wretched woman" taunts the poet by saying "poetry is one thing, life another," he concludes she is right, "for her brief days will soon be over / but she will live infamous in his poems forever" (GB 30). In "The Seduction," he recounts a chauvinistic prescription for seducing a woman with words:

First he knocks her down  
by assaulting her soul;  
telling her she's vain, superficial  
and adding—to drive his point home—  
that she is frivolous  
and terribly, terribly selfish. (LP 72-73)

The poet goes on to explain how this tactic works: the woman is filled with remorse; remorse is a "sure-fire aphrodisiac" in women; their contrition is a variant form of vanity, and vanity is a "quickener / of the sexual appetite." The poet judges the right moment, when the woman is "sufficiently broken, / humbled and contrite," to toss her a compliment "as one tosses a bone to a famished bitch." The seduction is complete. The woman's "gratitude is immense" and she expresses this gratitude by stretching out in "perfect humility" while the poet "rises beautifully to the occasion" and "dazes her with sweet, forgiving kisses."

Layton's work reveals a belief that the power of the male (as poet) over language gives him the sexual power and control over women. His poem for Jackie Kennedy, "Why I Don't Make Love to the First Lady," reveals his egocentric, if playful, conviction that the poet is sexually irresistible:

Of course I could have her!  
In a flash, with a snap of my fingers:  
An arrogant magician,  
I'd put words under her perfect feet  
and make her fly to me.  
She'd land in my arms  
reciting one of my poems. (CP 224)

Layton's notion of the poet's sexual power over the woman takes on mythic proportions in his own life. He writes to Desmond Pacey of reading some of his erotic poems to an audience of school girls in Toronto:

But after awhile they relaxed their guards and let  
their smiles and juices run naturally over their  
upper and lower parts. When at the end I said I'd

better stop reading or they wouldn't be able to sleep at night, they looked at one another with a knowing lasciviousness . . . In the meantime, of course, my hands had been stroking their hidden and delicious parts, squeezing them with an energy that only an imagination fired by erotic poetry and frustration can muster.

(Cameron 383)

This power of the word is not one Layton sees as available to women. Many of Layton's students have been women, and ostensibly he is an encouraging and helpful teacher. He became well known for his "coffee romances," the meetings he arranged over the years with a number of his female students and admirers, many of them aspiring to be writers, where they discussed and argued poetry for long hours over endless cups of coffee. Many of his "coffee romances" went well beyond the chit-chat stage and led to sexual liaisons (Cameron 266). The dichotomy between the concerned teacher/poet and the lecherous demagogue is captured in Layton's own words in a poem titled "Misunderstanding," a play on the words *Miss*, *understanding*:

I placed  
my hand  
upon  
her thigh.  
By the way  
she moved  
away  
I could see  
her devotion  
to literature  
was not  
perfect. (LP 15)

Layton's poetry often puts these adoring females in an explicitly sexual context. In "Homage to Lucullus," he speaks of the "repressed virgins" (CP 262) bringing him their bad poetry each year. Furthermore, in "The Sparks Fly," he shows outright contempt for his students: "for kicks, I sometimes speak / the lines of a poem / to the caged astonished dimwits / then wait for the gibbonous screech" (CP 76). For a woman writer to show potential, she must overcome the handicap of her womanhood—she must transcend her sex. One woman, an aspiring poet who had a coffee romance with Layton recalls: "He told me he liked my poems because, unlike most women writers, I was able to transcend myself" (Cameron 439).

Layton continually registers surprise when the "trivial, empty-headed" darlings of his poems show any sign of intelligence. In "Aftermath," he is incredulous that the woman he held in his arms a few minutes before, "eyes glazed, bubbling spit" sits composed and "ladylike" talking about "Portuguese wines, / Africa, grief, and Napoleon III" (CP 286). In "Betrayal," the poet is floored when his "lumpish mistress" espouses "a new thought / in radical politics / —one which he had not given her!" (CP 243). He does not even consider that she could be expressing her own opinion. Since the thought is not his, and must have come from another man, he takes this as evidence she has betrayed him with a new lover.

The extreme act of male supremacy is to mute the woman altogether, and Layton constructs woman's silence with images of wordlessness. In "The Furrow," a rent in the window screen reminds the poet of "her mouth, always / open . . . but wordless, mere wire, it says nothing" (GB 46). In "Absence," he says to his love, "I make a silence / out of your name" (CP 573), and, in "Talk at Twilight," he says of his lover's voice "I smother it / in a blanket of silence" (CP 474).

It becomes increasingly difficult for anyone to defend Layton's poetry as a protest against inhibition and prudishness. Apologies for him, such as Louis Dudek's made in the late 1950s, that the colonial gentility of English Canada could not assimilate his sensibilities,<sup>12</sup> no longer ring true. Cameron uses the analogy of a boxer still punching after his opponent has left the ring as she points out that the puritanism Layton once attacked has virtually disappeared from the Canadian literary scene (404).

Nowhere has Layton been more out of touch with the times than in his attitude toward the feminist movement. He is proud to be considered the archetypal male chauvinist pig. He writes to Pacey in 1972: "Skirts going up and pantyhose coming down—that's the only kind of dialectics I'm interested in nowadays" (Cameron 404). To Dorothy Rath he writes of his plans to visit Roumania: "They say that the women of Roumania are beautiful and corrupt which is just the way I like them. Also they've probably never heard of Women's Lib. which is an additional point in their favour" (Layton and Rath 179). At the same time as feminist writers like Kate Millet and Betty Friedan were working to open eyes and raise the collective consciousness of society, Layton, the self-professed liberator of the spirit, writes

<sup>12</sup> Seymour Mayne, ed., introduction, *Irving Layton: The Poet and His Critics* (Toronto: McGraw, 1978) 7.

to Pacey, after appearing on a CBLT-TV "Life Style" program with Kate Millet:

My native chivalry with women stopped me from cracking her on the head, which is what she was really asking for. She's a militant ignoramus whose book *Sexual Politics*, I now suspect was ghost-written. . . . She's a menace, not to men, but to her own sex; and if women know what's good for them . . . they'll shut her up as soon as possible . . . . Beside her, that other prick-envying communist, Betty Friedan, is an intellectual giant. (Cameron 405)

Freedom was fine for men, but not for women. Layton's diatribes against feminists verbalized his attitude toward his wives and lovers. He presumably found the idea of male and female equality threatening and untenable. He continually sought escape from middle-class stability and morality, but, even in bohemia, woman's "place" was not on the same plane as man's. With his first wife, Faye, he was both married and "free." She represented the smothering comfort of a food-centered woman from which he longed to escape. He used her when he needed her, although he felt no particular commitment to the marriage (Cameron 118). Layton says the "hideousness" of his "plight" provided him with a new definition of marriage: two strangers using the same toilet bowl.<sup>13</sup> Betty Sutherland (later Boschka Layton) was an artist herself and offered him a life of bohemian unworldliness, spiced with sexual adventure and freedom from pressure to earn money or raise a family. Yet Layton was shocked by Betty's casualness when it came to housekeeping and expected her to iron his shirts (Cameron 224-25). Aviva Layton, also a free spirit and a writer, shared a supposedly open marriage with Layton but was still expected to know her domestic place. She tells how he would come through the door shouting "Dinner! Aviva! Tea!" (Cameron 374). The double standard Layton adhered to in his relationships, his expectation that woman's "place" was either to be involved in sexual activity or in domestic pursuits, is captured graphically in a sketch done in anger by Betty after Layton began having an affair with Aviva. It shows Aviva laid out on a kitchen table, Layton's huge, black-maned head between her legs (Cameron 273).

Layton's poetry conveys no sentiment to the contrary. Two poems quoted below encapsulate his anti-feminist credo and

---

<sup>13</sup> Irving Layton, *Waiting for the Messiah: A Memoir* (Toronto: McClelland, 1989) 206.

confirm his misogyny. The first is "Teufelsdröckh Concerning Women":

Women are stupid.  
 They're cunning but they're stupid.  
 Life with a capital L wants it that way.  
 They're cunning with their clefts  
 Where nothing can dislodge it  
 Not even Phil 301 at Queen's or Varsity.  
 Women will never give the world a Spinoza,  
 A Wagner or a Marx;  
 Some lab technicians and second-rate poets, yes,  
 But never an Einstein or a Goethe.  
 Vision is strictly a man's prerogative,  
 So's creativity  
 Except for a handful of female freaks  
 With hair on their chins and enlarged glands.<sup>14</sup>

As Cameron points out, poems such as this are not likely to speak to a generation that turned to Margaret Atwood for consciousness-raising about sex roles (406). "Overheard in a Lavabo" reveals what Layton sees as the real threat of feminism—the weakening of men's power over women, as women begin to liberate themselves from the oppressive male ideal of sensuality and submissiveness:

Between marxism and feminism  
 the modern American female  
 has become as sensual  
 as an iron gate  
 She talks liberation  
 but it's Calvin  
 that's in her joints  
 and seals her lovely orifices  
 She inhabits her body  
 as if it were on hire  
 to be returned after its use  
 to Madame Tussaud's waxworks  
 I'd rather fuck a stovepipe  
 for at least warmth  
 if not fire  
 once passed through it<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Irving Layton, *Lovers and Lesser Men* (Toronto: McClelland, 1973) 85.

<sup>15</sup> Irving Layton, *For My Neighbours in Hell* (Oakville: Mosaic, 1980) 28.

Layton claims vision and creativity as a man's prerogative and is threatened when he encounters such qualities in a woman. Most of the women in Layton's life have been artists themselves, poets, writers, and painters, yet it is woman's power to create he fears most. He associated a bohemian, artistic life style with sexual freedom, so he sought out women he felt measured up (or down) to his standards. Yet their creative work was not to be pursued at the expense of what he considered "women's work," that is providing the domestic comforts which allowed him the freedom to create. Although Betty was an accomplished painter, for instance, social evenings at their home centered on his work, and often guests were completely unaware that Betty was an artist (Cameron 226-27).

The protagonists of Aviva Layton's novel *Nobody's Daughter* are thinly disguised representations of her and Layton. A line from Aviva's fiction captures the essence of Layton's compulsion to gather women around him: "Alex [the fictional Layton] was terrified of the power of women. That's why he surrounded himself with them—they diffused one another. There was safety in numbers—or so he thought."<sup>16</sup> This fear of women's creative power is borne out in Layton's poetry by the way he uses images of menstruation, pregnancy, and birth. That he associates these images with the creative process is clear from the way he uses them in relation to himself: his times without writing are times of "barrenness," he describes the state of readiness to write as his head feeling like "a cloud pregnant with rain," and he refers to poetic inspiration as a "great impregnation" (Cameron 353-54). When associated with women in his poetry, the same imagery is used negatively. In "Lady Macbeth," he attacks the "bloody communist / with a red flag between her legs," exposing his immature and anti-feminist bias toward the "foul state" and "defilement" of a menstruating woman.<sup>17</sup> In "Man and Wife," he describes the loss of maleness and individuality, and the death of creativity and freedom, in terms of returning to the womb. He sees this as more abhorrent than being left to lie "in the field, the filthy ditch, / the busy metropolitan street" (CP 364). In "For My Incomparable Gypsy," he degrades the physical changes which occur with pregnancy. He acknowledges that "brain and instinct are programmed / to infecundate all beauty" but restrains himself from contributing to the "pukes and the rounded belly" of pregnancy. While he gives her leave to "go fuck and fill your womb with child," he prefers to have woman's unpregnant beauty celebrated in a poem or painting: "The beauty that nature

<sup>16</sup> (Toronto: McClelland, 1982) 147.

<sup>17</sup> Irving Layton, *Final Reckoning: Poems 1982-1986* (Oakville: Mosaic, 1987) 36.

would fill / with pregnancies I'd keep sterile / forever, to be gazed at, not touched: / a poem, a canvas under glass" (LP 106-07). "Bicycle Pump" contains a repulsive image of the pregnant woman as a faulty, blown tire. Note as well the coital position of the male while he mechanically pumps away to fill her void:

The idle gods for laughs gave man his rump;  
 In sport, so made his kind that when he sighs  
 In ecstasy between a woman's thighs  
 He goes up and down, a bicycle pump;  
 And his beloved once his seed is sown  
 Swells like a faulty tube on one side blown. (CP 254)

For Layton, the pregnant woman presented a flesh-and-blood delivery of a life that was more alive than his poems. Woman, then, was the very paradigm of creativity. He explored this notion in his correspondence with Pacey (Cameron 354). He feared it was an experience from which he was forever excluded and one with which he could not compete.

Irving Layton's status as a poet, as a user of language, cannot be denied. His work is sexist and grossly anti-feminist, but the sheer volume of that work, Layton's longevity, and his public presence have firmly entrenched him in our literary canon. As long as readers and students continue to buy his books and study his poetry, it is important that critics not ignore him. Dale Spender argues in *Man Made Language* that language is not neutral. It is not only a vehicle which carries ideas, but it is a shaper of ideas as well. This makes language a paradox for human beings: it is both a creative and inhibiting medium. When sexist language and sexist theories are culturally available, the observation of reality is also likely to be sexist, and by this means sexism can be perpetuated and reinforced (Spender 139-41). So what does one do with Irving Layton? Perhaps a feminist critique is the only valid approach to the work of such a poet.

Sandra Gilbert's answer to the question "what do feminist critics want?", offers a challenge to readers and critics of literature. As she points out, feminist critics are undertaking a rigorous and responsible re-vision of women, of traditions, and of texts.

Such re-visions should function in two ways: as new visions or understandings of our literary lives and as new versions or transformations of those lives. Both approaches suggest a possibility that few people have taken seriously since the

Romantic period: the possibility. . . that through  
literary study we can renew our lives.

(Showalter 44)

**If a feminist reading of Layton contributes to the understanding  
and leads to a transformation, then let the Messiah keep coming!**

**University of New Brunswick**