

## Canadian Literature Symposium 2013

### Whatever Else: An Irving Layton Symposium

University of Ottawa

3-5 May 2013

## Programme

### Friday May 3

- 11:00-1:00 Registration Lobby, Department of English, Arts Building 3rd Floor
- 1:00-2:00 Introductory Remarks
- Panel 1 **Layton, Scandal and Mass Media**
- Irving Layton's Broadcast Controversies: *Fighting Words* and *The Pierre Berton Show*  
*Joel Deshaye (McGill University)*
- The Mechanical Layton; or, the Unmaking of Typographic Man  
*Dean Irvine (Dalhousie University)*
- 2:30-3:30 Panel 2 **Layton, Publishing and the Matter of Books**
- "A book, half-shut, in spectacular covers": Betty Sutherland's Designs and the Material Modernism of Irving Layton's Early Collections  
*Michèle Rackham Hall (Trent University)*
- Fierce and Ridiculous: McClelland and Stewart, Frank Newfeld and the Branding of Irving Layton  
*Cameron Anstee (University of Ottawa)*
- 4:00-5:00 Keynote **Layton as Ethical Subject: The Later Poetry and the Problem of Evil**
- Brian Trehearne (McGill University)*
- 5:00-7:00 **Wine & Cheese Reception**

### Saturday May 4

- 9:30-10:30 Panel 3 **Making and Unmaking the Canadian Tradition**
- Restless Rivals: Revisiting the Relationship between Irving Layton and Louis Dudek, and its Impact on the Development of Modernist Poetry in Canada  
*Collett Tracey (Carleton University)*
- More Myths of Montreal: Irving Layton, Jewish Thematics and the Mainstream  
*Norman Ravvin (Concordia University)*
- 11:00- Panel 4 **"Final Reckoning": Layton and the Holocaust**

12:00		<p>“It Would Be a Lie”: Layton and the Contradictions of the Holocaust  <i>Jordan Berard (University of Ottawa)</i>  Cruel Creatures: Layton's Animal Poems as a Response to the Holocaust  <i>Emily Essert (McGill University)</i></p>
12:00-1:30	Lunch	
1:30-2:30	Panel 5	<p><b>Layton and the Nonhuman: Ecology and Lyric</b>    “in fellowship of death”: Animals and Nonhuman Nature in Layton’s Ecopoetics  <i>Jacob Bachinger (Memorial University)</i>  Animal Deaths and the Lyric Voice in Layton  <i>Robert David Stacey (University of Ottawa)</i></p>
3:00-4:30	Screening	<p><b>A Red Carpet for the Sun: The Life of Irving Layton</b>    Documentary Film followed by Director’s Talk  <i>Donald Winkler</i></p>
6:00	Dinner	<b>Location TBA</b>
8:00	Reading	<b>Layton Reloaded: Poetry and Performance Inspired by the Work of Irving Layton</b>

**Sunday May 5**

9:30-10:30	Panel 6	<p><b>Layton and American Poetics</b>    The Mountain Came to Him: Irving Layton’s Black Mountaineering  <i>Zachariah Wells (University of New Brunswick)</i>  Irving Layton’s Contribution to Cid Corman’s <i>Origin</i>  <i>Daniel Bratton (Conestoga College-McMaster University)</i></p>
11:00-12:30	Roundtable	<p><b>“Forget the rhetoric, the trick of lying”: Layton in Retrospect</b>    Irving Layton: Outside of the Box  <i>Seymour Mayne (University of Ottawa)</i>  Irving Layton as <i>Till Eulenspiegel</i>: The Prankster as Critic  <i>Elspeth Cameron (Brock University)</i>  Some Little Anthologized Poems that Deserve Greater Anthologization; or, Towards an Expansion of <i>Fornalutx</i>  <i>George Elliott Clarke (University of Toronto)</i></p>
12:30	Closing Remarks	

## Keynote Speaker Abstract

### Layton as Ethical Subject: The Later Poetry and the Problem of Evil

**Brian Trehearne (McGill University)**

A reinvigoration of Irving Layton's critical and public reputation will profit from a fresh response to the poet as an ethical subject. Crucial statements of Layton's Nietzscheanism by Wynne Francis and Kurt Van Wilt initiate such a response but draw relatively little on Nietzsche's major works of ethical reaction, *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morals*. An impediment to reading Layton well today is the apparent decline of his poetry's quality in the volumes following his adoption of a prophetic *ethos* for the modern poet in *Periods of the Moon* (1967) and *The Shattered Plinths* (1968). The paper will interpret the poetry bracketed by "For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation on Flies and Kings" (1958) and "A Tall Man Executes a Jig" (1963) as the period of Layton's fullest articulation of Nietzsche's ethics before proposing that the poet's decision in the mid-1960s to grapple with the Holocaust led to an expression of historical *ressentiment* that Nietzsche would have scorned as an expression of "slave morality" and that evacuated the ethical richness, and with it much of the aesthetic force, of Layton's later poetry. Appeals to Giorgio Agamben's reflections on *ressentiment* and Holocaust experience in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1998), and to the later poetry's return to the invective tradition of Roman poetry that had helped to prompt the satires of the 1950s, will moderate this judgment by proposing alternative valuations of the later poetry's ethical and aesthetic stances.

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## **Roundtable Abstracts**

### **"Forget the rhetoric, the trick of lying": Layton in Retrospect**

#### **Irving Layton as Till Eulenspiegel: The Prankster as Critic** *Elsbeth Cameron (Brock University)*

This roundtable presentation will consider Irving Layton as a sort of Till Eulenspiegel. It will position part of his legacy as an enduring folk myth based on (quite often scatological) pranks. These pranks are often criticisms of unpleasant aspects of society. Although the pranks are often morally or legally wrong, they serve a greater purpose of truth.

#### **Some Little Anthologized Poems that Deserve Greater Attention; or, Towards an Expansion of *Fornalutx*** *George Elliott Clarke (University of Toronto)*

This roundtable presentation will examine how certain themes, influences, and theoretical concerns central to Irving Layton's work have been suppressed by editors of his anthologized work. It will use *Fornalutx*, edited by Brian Trehearne, as a case study.

#### **Irving Layton: Outside the Box** *Seymour Mayne (University of Ottawa)*

Layton's place or legacy is better understood today if we see his work in context with Jewish writers in the U.S. and the U.K. Layton's poetry and strenuous literary critiques parallel the work of Karl Shapiro, Anthony Hecht and Allen Ginsberg in the U.S. and Emanuel Litvinoff, Danny Abse and A. Alvarez in the U. K. It is more constructive to see him as a Jewish author writing in English and part of an inter-cultural trans-national literature. Anthologies such as Anthony Rudolf and Howard Schwartz's pioneer *Voices*

*within the Arc: The Modern Jewish Poets* and canonical studies by scholarly critics like Ruth Wisse point the way to a new understanding of Jewish English language writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who share common styles and themes more grounded in their cultural heritage as Jews than as American, Canadian or British defined literary figures.

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## **Presenter Abstracts**

### **Fierce and Ridiculous: McClelland and Stewart, Frank Newfeld and the Branding of Irving Layton**

***Cameron Anstee (University of Ottawa)***

This paper will critically consider the material history of several of Irving Layton's books published by McClelland and Stewart and designed by Frank Newfeld (*A Red Carpet for the Sun* [1959], *The Swinging Flesh* [1961], *Love Where the Nights Are Long* [1962], *Balls for a One-Armed Juggler* [1963], *The Laughing Rooster* [1964]) in order to understand their role both in establishing Irving Layton's celebrity and in constructing a visible canon of Canadian Literature in the earliest days of Canadian Literature as a field of study. It will consider Irving Layton's complicated relationship to the Canadian reading public and emerging Canadian literary establishments by performing a close reading of the book objects through which he was 'branded' nationally at the height of his fame.

### **“In fellowship of death”: Animals and Nonhuman Nature in Layton's Eco-poetics**

***Jacob Bachinger (University College of the North)***

Irving Layton is not usually considered a “nature poet,” yet his poems often feature precise references to and careful observations of nonhuman nature. My ecocritical approach will examine the environmentally-oriented aspect of Layton's work, fleshing out his underappreciated eco-poetics. In particular, I will pay specific attention to a recurring theme in many of his best known poems, such as “Cain,” “The Predator” and “The Bull Calf”: the poet's identification with a dead or dying animal.

### **“It Would Be a Lie”: Layton and the Contradictions of the Holocaust**

***Jordan Berard (University of Ottawa)***

This paper will argue that the contradictions that plague Layton's poetry and prose about the Holocaust are the very natural result of his attempts to work through his relationship to a traumatic event that he only experienced from a distance but that had profound implications for his identity as a Canadian Jewish poet. In order to “make clear...Belsen,” for his readers, Irving Layton first had to make sense of the event – and his relationship to it – for himself.

### **Irving Layton's Contributions to Cid Corman's Origin**

***Daniel Bratton (Conestoga College-McMaster University)***

The literary friendship between Cid Corman and Irving Layton, though treated in several publications, has not received the attention it deserves. Corman's *Origin* magazine not only featured Layton's poetry in issue 1.14 but also introduced many international readers to the new Canadian poetry through Layton's guest-

edited issue 1.18 (Winter-Spring 1956). At the same time, Corman brought Layton into the orbit of the Black Mountain poets Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, who had respectively been featured in the first two issues of *Origin*. Creeley, as editor of the *Black Mountain Review*, invited Layton onboard as contributing editor. As well, Creeley's Divers Press in Mallorca published Layton's *In the Midst of My Fever* (1954), with Creeley designing and printing Contact Press's publication of Layton's *The Blue Propeller* the following year. Corman and Layton's promotion of each other's work and exchange of energy and poetics greatly enriched the North American and international literary scenes of the mid-century, yet both poets have suffered a critical neglect in recent years that demands redress.

## **Irving Layton's Broadcast Controversies: *Fighting Words* and *The Pierre Berton Show***

**Joel Deshaye (McGill University)**

The presentation focuses on radio and television broadcasts featuring Irving Layton. Layton wanted to be seen and heard in these media so that he could popularize, through controversy, an art associated with a small number of intellectuals. From the mid-1950s to around 1960, he was involved in debates on both televised and radio versions of the CBC's *Fighting Words* and, in the mid-1960s, on *The Pierre Berton Show*. Numerous authors, notably including Leonard Cohen, Miriam Waddington, and Morley Callaghan, argued with Layton about topics such as high and low cultures, mass media, propaganda, and celebrity.

## **Cruel Creatures: Layton's Animal Poems as a Response to the Holocaust**

**Emily Essert (McGill University)**

This paper investigates Irving Layton's delayed poetic response to the Holocaust, and argues that certain poems of the later 1950s and early 1960s constitute an indirect response to those events. It asserts that Layton frequently represented humans as animals, or depicted human violence toward animals, in order to address the moral or philosophical question posed by those atrocities: what are we that we are capable of such cruelty? A belief in humanity's similarity to other creatures offered Layton a possible answer, so that his animal imagery responds to the historical events of the Holocaust by considering the underlying moral issues that emerge from them.

## **The Mechanical Layton; or, the Unmaking of Typographic Man**

**Dean Irvine (Dalhousie University)**

This paper will address Layton's troubled legacy as editor, publisher, and poet and his role in the production of an unabashedly masculinist modernist print culture in Canada. It will correlate the formation of his scandal-seeking literary persona in little magazines (*First Statement*, *Northern Review*) and by small presses (First Statement Press, Contact Press) with his public persona on radio and television and in documentaries. At the same time, I will speak to the unmaking of his literary persona that began in the 1980s and backlash against his chauvinistic self-fashioning as an agent provocateur. The pairing of McLuhan and Layton raises a series of questions that will guide my examination of Layton's scandal-troubled masculinity. To what extent does Layton's literary persona already anticipate the process of his unmaking, even as he is reaching out to wider publics through electronic media? Is Layton's mass-media persona the unwitting gravedigger of his literary persona? If Layton's already been unmade by the same print and electronic mechanisms that he manipulated for the making of his scandalous personae, how might he be remade—and remediated—in a scandal-saturated age of digital media?

## **“A book, half-shut, in spectacular covers”: Betty Sutherland's Designs and the Material Modernism of Irving Layton's Early Collections**

## ***Michèle Rackham Hall (Trent University)***

This essay examines the material aspects of two of Layton's early collections designed and/or illustrated by his second wife, Betty Sutherland: *The Cold Green Element* [1955] and *The Bull Calf and Other Poems* [1956]. Both books include Sutherland's bold prints characterized by either a simplification or distortion of forms, as well as colourful or tonal contrasts: aesthetic features establishing a modal tension between apocalypse and regression that Sherill E. Grace suggests all Expressionist art "displays and argues out" (39). Sutherland's designs and illustrations highlight and strengthen these Expressionist tensions in Layton's poems and are, therefore, substantial paratexts complicit in creating meaning.

## **More Myths of Montreal: Irving Layton, Jewish Thematics and the Mainstream**

### ***Norman Ravvin (Concordia University)***

Irving Layton found broad, varied audiences in the 1960s and '70s. However, his career has yet to be carefully examined for how his poetry and fiction offered groundbreaking Jewish material amidst a largely Toronto-based, Anglo-Protestant literary tradition. Making substantial use of Layton's poetry and short fiction, this talk will address Jewishness as a motivating element in his writing, and as a complicating factor in his reception in this country. It will aim to reposition us, as Layton's audience, in relation to key aspects in his oeuvre and to consider the overall reception of major Jewish writers in the Canadian mainstream.

## **Animals Deaths and the Lyric Voice in Layton**

### ***Robert Stacey (University of Ottawa)***

A man, writes Layton, is an "absurd animal"—a "god with an asshole," whose "soul [is] encased in rotting flesh" ("The Absurd Animal"). This assertion, repeated in different ways and with different emphases throughout his long career, isolates a crucial trope in Layton's thought: not, primarily, that human life is absurd (which he surely believed), but that the human condition, if it is to be understood at all, must be thought in relation to, and in its tension with, animal life. The almost obsessive recurrence of animal deaths in Layton's work, particularly at the hands of the poet himself, has been noted by many critics, but the connection between the presence of dead or dying animals and the emergence of the poet's voice as Voice—that is to say, as fully human speech capable of articulating the very absurdity of subjectivity as such—has yet to be adequately addressed or understood. In opposition to Brian Trehearne, who writes in his introduction to *Fornalutx*, that "Animals...thus stand in Layton's ethics for those whose creative vitality is sacrificed at the hands of ignorant, joyless, and frustrated 'runts' seeking to prove their grandeur" (xxx1), this paper follows a line of thought pursued by Giorgio Agamben in his works *Language and Death* (1991) and *The Open* (2003) by arguing that animals present themselves in Layton's work as voiceless subjects whose "silent screams" are the enabling condition for the lyric poem, "the effect of a voice" (Paul DeMan). In other words, animals death are not simply occasions for speech, opportunities to decry the inhumanity of man, but stage the emergence into language of the human subject as the definitive condition of its humanity, with all of the ethical, spiritual and political encumbrances entailed therein.

## **Restless Rivals: Revisiting the Relationship Between Irving Layton and Louis Dudek, and Its Impact on the Development of Modernist Poetry in Canada**

### ***Collett Tracey (Carleton University)***

From their initial exciting meeting on McGill Campus when they were both in their twenties, to their fiery

outbursts of disdain more than a half century later, the relationship between Irving Layton and Louis Dudek was passionate, tumultuous and extremely productive from a literary perspective. Sharing a similar vision of the direction in which Canadian poetry needed to move in the middle part of the twentieth century, the two men committed themselves to steering it there. Best of friends, and eventually worst of enemies, during the Modernist period, they wrote some of this country's best poems. In the process, they participated in numerous little magazines and presses that ultimately served to begin the careers of most of Canada's best-known poets. My paper will re-examine the history of Layton and Dudek's interactions and correspondence with a view to understanding how their interactions and contributions began, and nurtured, a Canadian literary revolution.

**The Mountain Came to Him: Irving Layton's Black Mountaineering**  
*Zachariah Wells (University of New Brunswick)*

My talk will address a topic much neglected by Layton critics and all but ignored by scholars of American poetry. I will account for Creeley and Olson's attraction to Irving Layton and explain Layton's reasons for finding common cause with them. I will also detail Layton's contributions to Black Mountain qua movement and highlight critical points of divergence between Layton and his American friends. My conclusion is that the affinities between Layton and Black Mountain's leading figures were ultimately more attitudinal than aesthetic, as they were with *TISH*, and therefore short-lived, however warm the initial embrace.