

Anna Pottier
Concordia University

Letter to the Editor: A Response to Dylan Brethour's "'Now many will live by your name': Irving Layton, Memory, and the Holocaust"

Dylan Brethour's name may also be known one day but perhaps not for penning the above-mentioned article.¹ Though not without appreciation of Irving Layton's Jewish-themed poems, Brethour seems to accuse him of being an offensively loud distracting presence, with more ambition than talent, whose anger ruins the effectiveness of his Holocaust-related poems. If the latest edition of Emily Post contains a chapter on the polite way of responding to the vicious persecution and slaughter of Jews, I've not read it. Her characterization of Layton "manipulating the ghosts of the Holocaust for the convenience of the present" (8) is stunningly derogatory. Her assessment of the poet's voice and intent is flawed largely due to a misreading of his poems. Having lived with Layton for nearly fourteen years and, immersed in his work as both wife and amanuensis, it behooves me to offer an alternative perspective.

As literature students know, and most people intuit, words carry areolas of meaning. Take any three words. Take baby; suckle; milk. An image is created. Instantly. Now take, say, hammer; spike; eardrum, and my point becomes painfully clear. There are a million ways to begin an article about Layton, né Lazarovitch. It is therefore dismaying, if not disturbing, that Brethour chooses to begin by declaring

¹ Please see: Dylan Brethour, "'Now many will live by your name': Irving Layton, Memory, and the Holocaust," *Student Journal of Canadian Jewish Studies* 2 (2008): 1-8.

Layton's birth date as "unknown" (1) and that his name means "son of a leper" (1). Sources readily list his birth date as 12 March 1912. Some sources indicate 6 March 1912. The back-story: Layton hated Stalin as much as, if not more, than Hitler. Upon learning of Stalin's death, he chose to celebrate his birthday on the sixth of March. Stalin died on 5 March 1953. One can reasonably speculate that the news reached Layton on the sixth. Brethour invites questions as to the rigorousness of her research and, words being rife with connotation, biases her article by suggesting, however inadvertently, that there is something shifty about this "son of a leper" with murky origins.

Brethour overstates her case in saying that he "devot[ed] much of his poetry to the question of religious identity" (1). It was never a "question" or a problem for him. His autobiography *Waiting for the Messiah*, after all, begins with his being "born with the smell of baked *challah* in his nostrils."² Indeed, born circumcised—the messianic sign—he would have been hard-pressed to ignore his Jewish identity. Aware of the travails endured by Jews, he nevertheless titled his selected Jewish poems, *Fortunate Exile* and, as attentive readers will note, this book closes on a defiantly positive note. Hebraism, however, is but one theme comprising the Layton canon.

Brethour's qualifying phrase "raw eroticism" (1) invites a brief examination as it illustrates how Layton is so often misread. Consider, for a moment, his poem "To the Girls of My Graduating Class." It is a piece he read often, usually to ripples

² Irving Layton, *Waiting for the Messiah* (1985; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2006) 1.

of nervous laughter triggered by the stereotype of Layton as a professional satyr.

Read carefully, however, the lines show a strikingly imaginative mind at work:

For there's no mercy in that bugler Time
That excites against their virginity
The massed infantry of days, nor in the tendril
Greening on their enchanted battlements.³

It is the esoteric concept of *Time* exciting against the girls' virginity, not Layton with his zipper down and his reproductive organ out. His poem "For 7515-03296"⁴ at public readings provoked similar sniggering, until it would become apparent that the title is not some hottie's phone number, but an Auschwitz survivor's tattoo. Prevailing stereotypes stand as an obscuring scrim between reader and text. Some critics, like valiant firemen on a bucket line, to mix metaphors, often promulgate stereotypes with neither pause nor thought. In Brethour's case, all that's needed is a little help in pulling the scrim aside.

Layton's rage at what was done to his fellow Jews stands out in the Canadian literary landscape a bit like the Rockies on the Prairies:

The pillar of fire: their flesh made it;
It burned briefly and died - you all know where.
Now in their own blood they temper the steel,
God being dead and their enemies not.⁵

Even when icily restrained and controlled, the subject matter itself was often deemed unfit for polite company. Well-mannered Canadians have long enjoyed branding Layton a "noisy Jew," a megalomaniac, etc. etc. It's the old denigrate-and-dismiss method. Brethour actually qualifies "Departed" (incorrectly titled "The Departed") a "success" because it is "a quiet poem" (6). However, Layton's

³ Irving Layton, *A Wild Peculiar Joy* (1982; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2004) 11.

⁴ Irving Layton, *Fortunate Exile* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987) 107.

⁵ *Fortunate Exile* 136.

poignant question, "But where / are gone the grizzled ecstatic / faces / of the vehement crazy men / who dreamed and prayed?" is a "failed attempt" (6). Why? According to Brethour, Layton has "failed to recreate an artistic image drawn from the past, and leaves the absence he encounters intact" (6). A closer look at the text shows Brethour's interpretation to be inexact. The very asking of the question fills or at least disturbs the void. The title "Departed" points to disappearance, not to the Jews. Put another way, the Jews are not problematic—but their disappearance is. Layton used the best tool at his disposal, language, to evoke the void and the criminality that created it.

To say that Layton's poems are "filled with an untamed malice and ill will" (1) is both offensive and grossly inaccurate. Brethour is to be applauded for her sincere efforts at tackling Layton, but malice is defined as the spiteful, ill-intentioned desire to harm others or to see others suffer. Malice and ill-will are what Nazis and latter-day anti-Semites harbour for their victims. This linguistic carelessness deflects the reader's attention from the text and propagates yet another nasty stereotype. Outrage and pain are sharply distinct from malice and ill-will. In the poem "Eine Kleine Nacht Musik," Layton states that if the murderers are dead, they are beyond his "curses and contempt / inviolable as a jackal's calcified turd,"⁶ i.e., beneath his contempt. The point may seem ridiculously subtle, but aesthetic rewards accrue with the degree of care taken in apprehending the text. In passing, Layton received death threats for publishing an article wherein he stated

⁶ *Fortunate Exile* 99.

the sons and daughters of Nazi Jew-killers must not suffer for the sins of their fathers.

Citing only poems, Brethour declares Layton's "beautiful bombast," his "intruding" and "invas[ive] ego" as "so damaging" to his Holocaust poems, that they succeed "only in creating a monument to his own revulsion" (2). Here again, Brethour rides roughshod over the text without examining its complexities. To say that his work has no positive effect is true; poetry can neither undo history nor prevent a repeat. That said, Holocaust survivors who came to his readings told me how his interest, compassion, and profound empathy had given them the will to live. No one else, they told me, had wanted to hear their stories, let alone read poems with them. *Fortunate Exile* has a greater positive effect than Brethour is willing to entertain, and it may well be commensurate with the reader's own capacity for empathy. If, as she claims, the reader "interacts only with Layton" (3) this is the reader's problem and the reader's "blindness" (3), not the poet's.

Her interpretation of "To the Victims of the Holocaust" is interesting for the way it misses the text's cues. Her claim that "Layton appoints himself as the sole bearer of memory, compelled to speak in defense of the dead" (4) has no basis outside of her imagination. Who dictates what should inspire a poet? By what law does a poet who uses the "lyrical I" become an egomaniac? Those best qualified to speak of the Shoah are all dead. The poet speaks forcefully and eloquently, as a *witness* rather than a self-appointed Grand Poobah of Unpleasant Material. Layton spoke on *behalf* of his "murdered kin,"⁷ and *asks* them to let him "be their parched

⁷ *Fortunate Exile* 108.

and swollen tongue.”⁸ He asks the victims for *their* “direst curses”⁹ and promises that he will utter them “unappeasable shades, till the sun turns black in the sky.”¹⁰ Layton serves merely as vocal conduit, the exact opposite of the egomaniac that haunts Brethour like a golem. Layton’s use of the word “unappeasable” is a heart-wrenching acknowledgment of the magnitude and inexpressibility of the victims’ pain.

To say there is a “sameness imposed on the dead” (4) and that using the pronoun “your” in “your direst curses” constitutes a “culling” (4) or reduction of the number of Holocaust victims begs elaboration. Brethour seems to be saying that the pronoun “your” reduces the six million to one. Saying that Layton “has his ghosts all rattle with the same furious voice” (4) suggests he used Holocaust victims as stage props. Her tone here, language being important, betrays either unfamiliarity with his work, or a certain antipathy to it.

Unlike the good Mr. Amery, the Austrian essayist who says that “retaining the memory of the Holocaust is something essentially ungraspable” (5) and, the Holocaust a “series of acknowledged absences” (5), Layton did not think silence was an option. Powerfully crafted language was the only implement at his disposal and he did not feel apologetic for using it. Certainly, there are people who hold that the only response to the Holocaust is a polite silence, like a nicely stifled burp. Survivors who requested Layton read aloud poems like “A Brief History of the Jews,” “For My Sons, Max and David,” “Israelis,” or “To The Victims of the Holocaust” would disagree. Vehemently.

⁸ *Fortunate Exile* 108.

⁹ *Fortunate Exile* 108.

¹⁰ *Fortunate Exile* 108.

In her exegesis on "For Anne Frank," Brethour has Layton breathlessly appropriating her "as an emblem" which "robs her [of] the integrity of her individualism" (7). Apparently, Layton fails badly here, as he doesn't ask us to "remember Anne Frank as *who* she was, but as *what* [he] insists she represents" (7).

To quote a few lines, Layton describes Anne Frank as:

A tender lyric an unequivocal destiny
forbade to grow into fertile splendour,
and the anguish of unfulfilment
in the inconsolable tears of each of us.¹¹

This delicate elegy helps crystallize the horror rather than "masking the bitter reality" of Anne Frank's death. How Layton's poem to this slaughtered child constitutes "making the Holocaust something 'bearable'" (7) is unfathomable to this reader.

One could point to other troubling word choices, such as "fabricate" (7). Even in reference to "fabricating" a symbol for the Holocaust, use of this word displays a certain insensitivity. As does her castigating Layton for not having an "honest remembering" (8) of the Holocaust. Perhaps she means to argue that no words can begin to fit the horrors, but labelling Layton a dishonest fabricator is disturbingly imprecise. Words, as mentioned earlier, carry many connotations. Jews continue to be accused of fabricating the Holocaust for their own gain. Adding to her characterization of Layton as rage-filled, full of untamed malice, ill-willed, bombastic, a roaring egomaniac, etc., she wraps up her article with a flurry of adjectival phrases such as "stubbornly mired"; "desir[ous] of revenge"; "intrusive"; "ambitio[ous]"; "blind [to] his melancholic throttle-hold on history" (8, 9). One

¹¹ *Fortunate Exile* 102.

wonders how Brethour ever got through those four poems! She seems more ready to engage with and add to prevailing stereotypes rather than to grapple with the poetry. Wait. "Throttle-hold on history"? According to the standard litany, Jews have throttle-holds on the world, the banks, and the media. Surely history could be left to others? As to Brethour's take on "A Midsummer's Dream in the Vienna Stadtpark," the superb irony went unnoticed.

What will not pass, however, and what many would deem unforgivable, is the deeply offensive statement accusing Layton of "manipulating the ghosts of the Holocaust for the convenience of the present" (8). It stuns for its indecency as well as its inaccuracy. Having not only helped see his autobiography and *Fortunate Exile* through to publication, but also observed his reaction when watching archival film footage of the Shoah, I can unequivocally say that Layton neither could nor would conceive of trying to grandstand atop mass graves. To suggest as much, or that he wanted people to focus on his anger, rather than what occasioned it, is obscene.

In conclusion, Brethour's reading of the poems as an abuse of history ultimately testifies to their success. They are so effectively rendered, and their message so painful, that she flinches and turns away. Rather than examine the texts, and quite possibly without intending to, Brethour does little more than offer permutations of the same old hoary stereotype: Irving Layton as "noisy Jew." Brethour, unfortunately, misses an opportunity to help provide a new generation with the means to approach Layton's work. Needless to say, he wished he'd never had to write one single "Holocaust poem." As regards to silence vs. addressing the Shoah debate, the survivors with whom I was honoured to speak were grateful for

his efforts. Layton's deep knowledge of, and affection for, the Jewish people is evidenced in the rage and pain with which he wrote about their persecution. The Holocaust is but one shard in the vast kaleidoscope of Jewish history. The great danger, when understanding of and appreciation for Jewish history and culture—including the Shoah—is lacking, is that their mass slaughter remains little more than an irritating abstraction, a big "So what?"