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Tribute to Irving Layton By Maria Ierfino

In *High Spirits: A Sacred Collection of Prose and Poetry*, I try to capture the essence of the creative process and the polarities of life and death. Fundamentally the creative process is a celebration of life; it is the beauty that springs from the 'fertile muck', to borrow Irving Layton's expression, the poet I praise in the collection.

I had the opportunity to pay homage to one of Canada's greatest poets at La Casa D' Italia in Montreal and it was a personal tribute to the prolific poet, Irving Layton, who passed away gently with the falling snow one white January evening.

How fitting that my daughter Aviva should sadly announce to me that Irving Layton had passed away on the 4th of January 2006. We had just arrived from Florida, the sunshine state.....the sun being such a powerful symbol in Layton's poetry and the sun being such a beacon in my own personal journey.

In *THE COVENANT* Layton once wrote that Aviva his wife was truly his muse and inspiration....." having doxologized you, lovely Aviva/ whose vernal name is loveliest of all." Aviva became Layton's immortal Muse! The year that I completed my thesis on the scatological dimension in the poetry of Irving Layton, was also the year that I gave birth to my beautiful baby girl, who I solemnly baptized as Aviva on behalf of Layton's muse. My daughter is my muse. Irving Layton wrote me a beautiful letter at the time, that I will always cherish; congratulating me (with a twinkle in his eye for sure) for producing two masterpieces in one year. He was very proud and honoured that I had called my little girl Aviva. He asked me to find out what she was dreaming and to make it happen for her. Irving Layton was like a kind grandfather and teacher to me and I will never forget him!

'There was Irving Layton, and then there was the rest of us' claimed Leonard Cohen (Gazette-January 5, 2006) who eulogized him by saying that Layton is "our greatest poet, our greatest champion of poetry." Layton has been an inspiration to many aspiring writers and he will be for many generations to come.

Without a doubt, Layton inspired me to write and his passion for the art was infectious. The author of more than 50 books and translations world-wide took the time to coach me on numerous occasions as I completed my dissertation. He was very generous, very kind, wise, clearly inquisitive and very learned. He was always curious about my Italian heritage and I recall that he had become a mellowed poet when I met him in the eighties in NDG (Notre Dame De Grace).

My first encounter with Irving Layton was when he came to our High School at the

request of Veneranda McGrath to read his poetry in the late seventies. I was captivated by his boundless energy and creativity. He actually read the poems that we wrote and provided sound advice with great empathy to all the eager students.

I was not surprised that the Italian Nobel committee twice nominated him for the Nobel prize for literature. In 1993 Layton became the first non-Italian to win the distinguished Petrarch Prize for Poetry. Somehow the Italians seemed to understand him and appreciated his art as I did.

Layton's focus was anchored in the "here and now" and he lived in joyful exuberance, always celebrating the sanctity of life. Even though he was firmly grounded in realism and in his younger years was renowned for his "joie de vivre", Layton was deeply spiritual and humble (as ironic as it may seem). His was a bacchanalian reverie.....those who dance best dance with desire, he wrote. He had no patience for those who lived a life without passion. Those were the people living a sort of death in life (constipated, fundamentalist and fearful).

He was the embodiment of La Dolce Vita and he fully embraced the creative life-force. Many poems depict the Italian artistic and sultry landscape that fascinated him, from Bambino in Cagliari, to Poet on the Square in Bologna, or to the Lady on the Piazza in Rome and Necrophilia written in Palermo. He even wrote one to my former North American Literature teacher entitled 'Veneranda Dancing', Naples 1982 (The Gucci Bag) and precisely captured the fire and charm of Italy.

On the opposite end of the spectrum Layton also struggled with the Roman occupation in Palestine during the time of Jesus Christ (For My Brother Jesus) and with any oppressor who enslaves people and reduces them to interchangeable units of production. To him it was crucial and politically of the utmost importance that the creative spirit be kept alive. His poems on the holocaust expose anti-semitism like no other Canadian writer dared to do. His stories about the Holocaust and the survivors he knew touched me so deeply. He frequently talked about man's inhumanity to man and he was a modern day prophet enraged by what he saw with an intensity that exploded in his writing.

His poems on the writings of Church 'fathers' who built up contempt for Jews, he claimed, for nearly two thousand years, surfaced over and over like a mighty mantra. He quoted Pope John XXIII's penitential prayer composed shortly before his death on June 3rd, 1963: "forgive us the curse that we wrongfully pronounced upon the name of the Jews. Forgive us that we crucified Thee in the flesh for the second time. For we knew not what we did". Layton was a heroic vitalist.

The true poet (Layton critic Wynne Francis once wrote in *The Darkening Fire and the Birth of Tragedy*), must have the imagination and the courage to commute between heaven and hell; for the writing of poems is a mode of becoming, a discovery of the depths of the poet's self and as much of reality as his sanity can tolerate. The poet recreates himself and his world with every poem he writes. In my encounters with Irving

Layton I could feel that he was constantly grappling with the dualities and ironies of life , but in the final analysis, his passion for life, art and creativity allowed him to transcend reality.

On Thursday April 6th 2006 (quietly bacchanalian) I attended the special Tribute to Irving Layton at the Blue Metropolis literary festival in Montreal and I sat there with calm composure and high esteem. I felt Layton's surreal presence as I stared at the two empty chairs at each end of the panel (consisting of Musia Schwartz, his daughter Sarah, Seymour Mayne, Don Winkler); one empty chair for those who are silenced around the world and the other for the strongest voice I have ever heard. His poetry was just jubilantly chiming like beautiful church bells. 2006 ended with a final farewell to Layton at the Jewish Public Library among friends, colleagues and with Aviva Layton sharing private memories and video clips from their precious past. The Muse, truly eternal, keeping the flame alive in our collective psyche.

Finally, and forever Irving Layton, great poet, teacher and mentor, you once wrote to me and my husband, that we gave you hope as you waited for the Messiah to come.....and now you give us hope as we wait for the Messiah to come !

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