

Irving Layton, Nietzsche and Nihilism

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Abstract:

This paper deals with Irving Layton's prowess in manipulating the term 'nihilism' to establish the inhuman ways of the world in general. The context is the Jewish Disaster. Layton's purpose in his poetry is to give an expose to the ways in which Jesus is cheapened. Layton establishes his prime concern of humanism in his poetry.

Key words: nihilism, bogs, matrix, Semites, transactional analysis, conditional reflex.

Irving Layton's emergence as a poet synchronizes with the tamed nature of his contemporaries whom he castigates in the poem *The Modern Poet*:

Since Eliot set the fashion
Our poets grow tame
They are quite without passion
They are without blame
Like a respectable dame. (1-5)

This is an accentuation of P.K Page's advocacy that the writers should take note not of nature, but of human society: "If (the poet) will hitch-hike tith towns and identify themselves with people, forget for a while the Country... he may find his age and consequently his belief." (P. K. Page, *Preview*. October 1942)

Layton concerned himself with-man's well-being in the world. Man has to emerge swimming against the ills of evil perpetrated by psychological "bogs" According to Layton, swimming against the psychological "bogs" is possible only by means of self-awareness and pulling oneself from the fathoms of the unconscious to the level of perceptual-conscious. Layton is specifically tormented by the Jewish disaster which is the Jewish holocaust. The disgrace, shame and maltreatment meted out to the Jews right from the Old Testament times disquiet him much.

Amidst this perturbation, the influence of Nietzsche's philosophy enlightens him. Layton was very much attracted towards Nietzsche's writings and he used to quote him profusely even during his boyhood while playing with friends. A reading of Layton's poetry relating to the Jewish themes brings to light the matrix of Nihilism as was conceived by Nietzsche. By presenting this aspect in his Jewish poems, Layton provides a key to the reader in general and to his own clan in particular as to the psychology involved in nihilism. In Layton's poetry the term nihilism does not have the dictionary meaning of belief in nothing and denial of all reality. According to Nietzsche nihilism is the "uncanniest guest" that visits humans. Nietzsche's in his *The Will to Power* draws our attention to one of the facets of nihilism: Existence is untenable when one recognises highest values. Nihilism is a psychological state which is reached when we seek a "meaning" in all events that is not there. The seeker becomes discouraged; it is getting ashamed in front of oneself as if one had deceived oneself all too long.(P 9.)

This view finds its full exploration in the poem *Anti-Semites*. Jesus Christ is viewed a nihilist because of his highest values and efforts in humanising the animal called man. Man can never be corrected of his follies and animalism. That is why is an anguished tone Layton bemoans that Jesus "With his ever spouting gouts/ of fresh

blood/ to make them miserable” did not and could not foist “that creep on them”. The intensity of belief and conviction to humanize man by His own sufferings smacks of high idealism. But, psychologically considered, this effort of Jesus to make others miserable by this sufferings brings to light Jesus’ state of “conditional response”, or “conditioned reflex”. The latter two are psychologically contrived stimuli that replace the original stimulus. That is, the ordinary method of resistance is supplanted by “fresh blood” to make them “miserable”. The resistance and persuasive logic of defence against the anti-Semites which is the original stimulus is substituted by the contrived stimulus of suffering to make them miserable. In course of time, this became socially acceptable accounting for ‘sublimation’ which is another psychological term that speaks of conversion of instincts or impulses into socially acceptable activities. Hence the direction in Christianity that “Jesus’ blood cleans us of all sins”. This is an attempt at “transactional analysis” - a kind of psychotherapy analysing one’s social exchanges—as directed at the perpetrators of evil—the anti-Semites . This kind of aim or ideal is high, and therefore it is nihilism. But the human evil is beyond the reach of psychotherapy. That is why Layton addresses Jesus:

You also had to burden
their consciences
by contriving with good usual
pushiness,
to get yourselves gassed, short and burnt
in Christian ovens
like human coke (7 - 13).

The irony is that the Christian nations themselves have turned anti-semites. Layton is anguished at the snatching away of Jesus from the semitic fold by the Christian nations.

What is obvious is that the nihilism of high ideals of Jesus in the form of psychotherapy ends up in failure. Animalism cannot be subjugated or subdued. It has to be countered intellectually-to persuade the Jews to bend down and ponder.

Another fact of nihilistic is the “weary and passive” one which Layton cadences in *For Neighbours in Hell* Regarding “Weary and passive nihilism”. Nietzsche observes:

The weary and passive nihilism no longer attacks. The
strength of the spirit may be worn out, exhausted so that
previous goals and values have become incommensurate
and no longer are believed so that the synthesis of values
and goals (on which every single culture rests) dissolves and
the individual values war against each other disintegration,
and whatever refreshes heals, calms. numbs emerges into
the foreground in various disguises, religious or moral or
political or aesthetic (*The Will to Power*, 18)

Layton’s poem *For My Neighbours in Hell* treats nihilism detailed above in a disparaging way. The Christian nations and their supporters who were responsible for the world wars and the eventual human disasters are called “Neighbours in Hell”, because they are characterized by “the frenzies of Killing and sex”. This fanaticism purges their “souls of phlegm”. This cold headedness

speaks of their animalism. This is an evidence of their exhaustion and weariness which does not attack or awaken them, but projects them as those in whom the Christian values become incommensurate and no longer are believed. Hence Layton calls them “culture cattle” elsewhere because values and goals of Christianity on which European culture is supposed to rest, dissolve. Hence Layton’s accusation that they are “wired up by instincts at odds with one another”.

That the blend of disintegration and emergence of “whatever, refreshes, heals, calm, numbs, emerges into the foreground in various disguises, religious or moral or political or aesthetic” find an assaulting derision in the poem: “Knowingly, on clean Streets/you breed cadavers/and name the horror love”. This is surely self-destruction which even makes Lucifer weep. Such treacherous people know they are doomed and damned, and cry within themselves despite the veil of decorum that civilizes them despite fragmentation. In this situation, even God cannot hear Lucifer's cry for redemption because of the sobs of the neighbours in hell. They are beset with passive nihilism. The irony of this kind of nihilism lies in the fact that they attack, and die within themselves through “sloth and conformity” to religious, moral, political and aesthetic culture with the stench of their own decomposition.

Discursing further on nihilism. Nietzsche observes in his *The Will to Power*:

The nihilist does not believe that one needs to be logical,
this can be done by those with strong spirits... such people
do not want and need judgment. Their nature demands
the No of the deed. The reduction to nothing by judgment
is seconded by the reduction to nothing by hand (18).

That the Christian nations were both perpetrators and onlookers of the ghastly tragedy of the twentieth century inflicted on the Jews is enough evidence that Christianization has not resulted in humanization. Callous heartedness and nonchalance for humanistic perspectives are properties of the “strong spirits” as observed by Nietzsche. Consequently, they are not guided by any sense of judgment. The best example is the tyranny inflicted by Hitler. Layton craftily combines the tyranny of Hitler with the insensibility of the contemporary poets over their blindness to human disaster.

In the poem *The Burning Remnant* Layton sympathises with the Jews-the chosen people of God-who have become aliens after being exiled into the world. This state of theirs defies the conviction and logic that God is love. The belief that the Jews are the chosen people of God, and God is infinite in his love and justice unto people gets a jolt when Layton asserts: “For the cosmos itself framed you/to mock god's pretence /to infinite justice and love.” This means that God himself is a nihilist for He has failed to guard His chosen people.

The white -culture attitude of Hitler resulting in his judgment that others particularly the Jews have no right to earn a living in the world coupled with the Russians maltreating them resulted in their sticking to “ghettos and crematoria” where God might sing for His chosen people.

All these are results of nihilism of lack of judgment and “reduction to nothing by hand.” This means that the principle of reality and morality is altogether absent in the psyche of the evil perpetrators. Hence Layton calls them “swine”.

Irving Layton cleverly ingrains the concept of nihilism in his poems to-arouse the consciousness of man in general, since he believes on line with Sigmund Freud in the concept of knowledge and self awareness as cures for the psychological ills of man.

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