

## HOW POEMS GET WRITTEN

Like  
 a memory  
 torn  
 at the shoulders,  
 my darling  
 wears  
 the chemise  
 I gave her —  
 a wedding gift.

At night  
 I tap out  
 my poems  
 on her hip bone.

When  
 she can't  
 sleep  
 either  
 we write  
 the poem  
 together.<sup>3</sup>

The parallel passages in these two poems are Layton's second stanza and Goethe's eighth couplet and the first line of the ninth. Goethe's crucial lines read in English prose: "I have often written poems in her arms and have counted the hexameter rhythm softly with the fingers of my hand on her back."

The parallelism does not lie in an identical choice of words nor in exactly the same image. For Goethe is more specific by identifying the metre and mentioning his hand, and by adding a qualifying adverb. Nor are the areas of the beloved's body (or should we call her 'metre maid') identical: Goethe chose her back and Layton, who is more specific at this point, her hip bone.

What these passages do have in common is the fact that the restless poet habitually uses the body of his female partner as an aid in mastering the rhythm of a poem in process. Taken in isolation, these passages could easily arouse feminine anger. How dare these poets thus make use of the female body while the person is asleep? Is it another case of ignoring the female mind while taking advantage of her physical beauty? — On literal reading,

3 Irving Layton, *The Collected Poems of Irving Layton* (Toronto/Montreal: McClelland and Stewart, 1971) 91.

## A Topos Sighted? Notes on Poems by Goethe and Layton

GERTRUD JARON LEWIS

A beautiful poetry reading by Irving Layton in our local public library a few years ago has never let me come to rest.<sup>1</sup> The reason for this disquietude was that one of Layton's poems caused me to have a *déjà vu*-reaction (or should I say *déjà entendu*?). It took me several weeks to locate in my memory what I had started to search for but could not immediately name: a poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe that had caused the reaction of familiarity when I heard Layton recite his own poem. The two poems are copied below:

## V. RÖMISCHE ELEGIE

Froh empfand ich mich nun auf klassischem Boden begeistert,  
 Vor- und Mitwelt spricht lauter und reizender mir.  
 Hier befolg' ich den Rat, durchblättere die Werke der Alten  
 Aber die Nächte hindurch hält Amor mich anders beschäftigt;  
 Mit geschäftiger Hand, täglich mit neuem Genuß.  
 Werd' ich auch halb nur gelehrt, bin ich doch doppelt beglückt.

Und belehr' ich mich nicht, indem ich des lieblichen Busen  
 Formen spähe, die Hand leite die Hüften hinab?  
 Dann versteh' ich den Marmor erst recht: ich denk' und vergleiche,  
 Sehe mit fühlendem Aug', fühle mit sehender Hand.  
 Raubt die Liebste denn gleich mir einige Stunden des Tages,  
 Gibt sie Stunden der Nacht mir zur Entschädigung hin.  
 Wird doch nicht immer geküßt, es wird vernünftig gesprochen;

Überfällt sie der Schlaf, lieg' ich und denke mir viel.  
 Oftmals hab' ich auch schon in ihren Armen gedichtet  
 Und des Hexameters Maß leise mit fingernder Hand  
 Ihr auf den Rücken gezählt. Sie atmet in lieblichem Schlummer,  
 Und es durchglühet ihr Hauch mir bis ins Tiefste die Brust.  
 Amor schüret die Lamp' indes und denket der Zeiten,  
 Da er den nämlichen Dienst seinen Triumphwirm getan.<sup>2</sup>

1 Sudbury, Ontario, March 1982.

2 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethes Werke* 14 Bde. Erich Trunz, Hrsg. 8th ed. (Hamburg: Christian Wegner, 1966) 1 160.

at least, it does not seem to be so, not with Layton in this case, nor altogether with Goethe although he, undoubtedly, could have gotten away with it at his time.

Layton in his final stanza acknowledges that his "darling" is not always the passive accomplice in his work but that, when insomnia troubles her too, she and he write poetry together. Goethe, in the stanza preceding the one translated above, writes about the rational or sensible conversation ("vernünftig," from "Vernunft", i.e. reason) that he and his "dearest one" have before she falls asleep.

To be fair, Goethe's poem is much more complex than my concentrating on these few lines may suggest. The poem initially speaks of his enthusiasm at being on classic Roman soil studying and enjoying ancient culture. And while he becomes learned during the days, he learns less at night but is twice as happy. But is it not a form of learning, too, he asks in the fourth couplet when his hand studies the shape of his beloved's bosom and hips? His experience with the woman's body makes him more knowledgeable about the marble statues, for he thinks back and compares when he looks at a marble object of art. The second line of the fifth couplet translates as "I see with feeling eyes and feel with seeing hands." It is Amor who is his teacher in this art. And Amor, who equally taught the ancients, thus bridges the poet's present erotic experience with the classic culture of the past.

Layton's poem is less extensive and comes right to the point. The metrical tapping is central to this particular piece of work. Its introductory phrase "Like a memory..." adds a past tense scope to this short poem, and the implied repetition makes it stretch into the future. It is a sparsely written poem with not a syllable too much and every word in place. Or, to put it in an obvious way: Layton's poem is as beautiful an example of late twentieth century poetic style as Goethe's is of late eighteenth century.

I finally decided to ask Mr. Layton himself whether he had known of Goethe's poem and also whether he saw this image in a poetic tradition. The essence of his much appreciated reply reads as follows:

No, I wasn't aware of Goethe's line when I wrote my poem.... I can only conclude that Goethe, like myself, had the habit of tapping lines on the adorable hipbone of the ladylove sleeping beside him. I imagine if poets the world over were polled, it would turn out that many besides Goethe and myself were inspired to do the same thing.<sup>4</sup>

One might suppose that we can isolate this image of the 'beloved as metre maid' as a poetic topos. But I must admit at the same time that, although I have been looking out in my reading for further instances during several.

4 Letter by Irving Layton of July 28, 1988.

years now, I have not been able to come up with another good example.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps someone else will be able to fill in the gaps.

Laurentian University

5 The contemporary German "Liedermacher" (songmaker) Hannes Wader has a stanza in his song "Es ist nach zwölf" which comes close to this topos but is not quite it:

Du sollst mit mir — hab ein wenig Geduld —  
auf den Sommer warten  
ich kenne nicht weit — eine Stunde von hier —  
einen großen verwilderten Garten  
dort darfst du laut lachen über das was ich  
mit 'nem Grashalm dir auf den Rücken schreibe  
dort erfinde ich tausend Dinge für Dich  
womit ich uns die Zeit vertreibe.... (Xenophon X-5001)

The poet here writes on his beloved's back with a blade of grass in order to amuse her.