

RACE, MILIEU AND MOMENT: A CONTEXTUAL READING OF THE SELECT POEMS OF NISSIM EZEKIEL AND IRVING LAYTON

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The French critic Hyppolyte Taine, while trying to establish a scientific approach to literature through an investigation of what created the individual who created the work of art, propounded the concept that it was the race, milieu and moment that shaped the creative mind. By “race” Taine meant the inherited disposition or temperament of the poet; by “milieu” he meant the circumstances or environment that modified the inherited racial disposition of the poet; and by “moment” he meant the momentum of past and present cultural traditions.

This paper is an attempt to understand the voices of the two Jewish poets namely, Nissim Ezekiel and Irving Layton through their select poems foregrounding the concept of Taine. The paper will scrutinize the respective individual voices after briefly introducing the two poets, though an introduction of the two poets may be a little redundant taking the literature students into consideration.

Ezekiel was born on 16 December 1924 in Mumbai. His father, Moses Ezekiel, was a professor of botany at Wilson College, and his mother was principal of her own school. The Ezekiels belonged to Mumbai’s Jewish community, known as the ‘Bene Israel’. In 1947, Ezekiel earned a graduation degree in Literature from Wilson College, University of Mumbai. He had a brief stint as a teacher of English literature after graduation and published literary articles during this period. For a while he dabbled in radical politics and shortly after that he sailed to England in November 1948. He studied philosophy at Birkbeck College, London. After three and a half years, Ezekiel returned home earning his passage as a deck-scrubber aboard a ship carrying arms to Indo-China.

Ezekiel’s first book, *The Bad Day*, appeared in 1952. In 1960, he published another volume of poems, *The Deadly Man*. He worked

as an advertising copywriter and general manager of a picture frame company during 1954–59, and in 1961, he co-founded the literary monthly *Jumpo*. He edited *Poetry India* during 1966–67. His fifth book of poems, titled *The Exact Name*, was published in 1965. During this period, he held short-term tenure as visiting professor at University of Leeds (1964) and University of Pondicherry (1967). In 1969, Writers Workshop, published his *The Damn Plays*.

The major themes of Ezekiel are: love, loneliness, lust, creativity and political pomposity, human foibles and the “kindred clamour” of urban dissonance, as rightly observed by one of his critics. However, “Among them ‘alienation’ and ‘belongingness’ are the most striking issues in the entire bulk of his poetry” (Awasthi, 2008: 79).

Ezekiel became the pioneer of “New Poetry” by his greater variety and depth than any other poet of the post-Independence period. In the words of Bruce King, “Of the group of poets—attempting to create a modern English poetry in India, Nissim Ezekiel soon emerged as the leader who advised others, set standards and created places of publication ...Ezekiel brought a sense of discipline, self-criticism and mastery to Indian English poetry. He was the first Indian poet to have such a professional attitude” (ibid.: 78).

Commenting on the tone of Ezekiel’s poems in general, John Thieme (2005) observes that, “...his work is centrally concerned with perception and his poetic persona is both that of an observer who regards his social world and his own behavior with a degree of amused detachment, and that of a complete insider” (xxi).

As if endorsing the observation made above, in one of his interviews Ezekiel said that, “I would like to see some alienation among Indo-English writers. However, undesirable from moral, social and other points of view, it has been aesthetically very productive provided it is genuine. You can’t pretend, you can’t play the game of alienation. If you are genuinely alienated... and feel you are hostile towards others and they are hostile to you, you hate their guts and they hate yours; this can produce great literature. This genuine alienation is really absent.” (Mahan, 2001: 102).

Irving Layton, the Canadian poet who has been taken up for the current investigation, was born on 12 March 1912 to Jewish parents in the Romanian town of Tirlgul Neamt. His family immigrated to Montreal in 1913, and was forced to live in a poor St. Urbain Street neighborhood. As a child he faced daily struggles with, among others, the Montreal French Canadians, who were uncomfortable with the growing numbers of Jewish newcomers.

When Irving was a young boy, his Mother was the centre of his world, and between receiving an alternating onslaught of Yiddish curses and warm displays of affection, she taught him about the duality of human nature. Layton's father Moishe had a strong effect on his young son especially his strong sense of the Divine, of the Poetic.

Irving's early literary influences included the poets Tennyson, Walter Scott, Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelly; the novelists Austen and George Eliot; the essayists Bacon, Goldsmith, Johnson, Addison, and Swift; and, of course, Shakespeare and Darwin. Layton also read Marx and Nietzsche. As for his political ideology, he began to deem himself a socialist, and in later years Layton identified with the New Democratic Party of Canada. He joined the Young People's Socialist League for a short time, and had fierce debates with budding politicians such as David Lewis and poets such as A. M. Klein.

When Layton was at his most prolific, he published a book almost every year. He won Canada Council grant, the first of which was in 1957, was for *The Improved Binoculars*. By the mid-1950s, Layton's work had become recognized by Canada's large publishing houses, and it was in 1959 that McClelland & Stewart published Layton's *A Red Carpet for the Sun*. It was the beginning of a long-standing and mutually rewarding relationship between Layton and McClelland & Stewart. This book won the Governor General's Award. It was also in 1959 that Layton won the prestigious Senior Arts Fellowship. The fellowship enabled Irving to travel abroad; and at this time he visited India, among the many countries he visited. In 1980, he was nominated for the Nobel Prize by Italy and Korea, though eventually the prize was won by Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Layton's biographer T. Jacobs (2013) makes the following pertinent observation on the poet:

Throughout his career, Layton's "tell it like it is" style won him an equal amount of enemies and worshippers. Fighting a battle against Puritanism for most of his life, Layton's work had provided the bolt of lightning that was needed to split open the thin skin of conservatism and complacency in the poetry scene of the preceding century, allowing modern poetry to expose previously unseen richness and depth. The 1940s through to the 1960s were years of discovery, and many writers have acknowledged Layton as both Teacher and Prophet. Layton inspired many to follow his lead and tirelessly helped younger poets and writers in need. Throughout the years, Layton has bestowed his love of words, sound, and indeed his love of life itself upon audiences and readers. (8)

Layton's poetic voice fell silent on 4 January 2006.

Having introduced the poets, in the following pages I have taken

up the analysis of the select poems of both the writers separately because, though both are Jews, they have adopted two different countries as their homeland and are exposed to two entirely different socio cultural situations. For the present investigation, I have opted for the Ezekiel's *Collected Poems of Ezekiel: 1952-88* since it contains most of his significant poems. As for Layton, I have opted for his collection titled *Fortunate Exile*. This collection is a selection from the previous publications and as rightly observed in its blurb, this collection "is a summing up of the poet's long quest for the meanings of his own religion in a universe marked by turmoil and makes a contemporary statement about man's relation to God."

The very opening lines of the very first poem in this collection titled "A Time to Change", strikes one of the major notes that runs through the whole collection of *The Collected Poems: 1952-1988*. It is about the yearning of the poet to return to the fold from which he has strayed. The sense of alienation and the consequent longing to return is evident in the lines quoted below:

We who leave the house in April, Lord
How shall we return? (3)

The poem reflects the exiled Jew's anguished mind. A few more lines are quoted from the poem to illustrate the point:

Debtors to the whore of Love,
Corrupted by the things imagined
Through the winter nights, alone,
The flesh defiled by dreams of flesh,
Rehearsed desire dead in spring,
How shall we return? (3)

A return to the uncorrupted stage, or return to the space of innocence and purity is desired in these lines. As the title points out, the poet identifies the time as the time to change. It is the longing to return to the original space, the root that grips the mind of the alien in the poet. The sense of alienation and the longing to return are traceable in quite a few other poems as well.

The note of despondency that is in the lines quoted above runs in "The Double Horror" too. The poet points out that there is no dearth of factors in the society that corrupts human mind. Various factors like newspapers, cinemas, radio features, speeches of

hypocrites and even toothpaste advertisements corrupt man. Having been corrupted people remain alienated. A few lines from the poem, which are relevant in the context, are given below:

Those who say Comrade are merely slaves and those
Who will not be my brothers share the acrid shame
Of being unwanted, unloved, incompetent
As leaders, disloyal servants, always alone. (8)

Though the corrupt call themselves comrades, their comradeship is pseudo in nature and is not honest. Sunk in corruption they do not trust one another. Deep within their minds there is no mutual understanding or genuineness of friendship. Further, the ideal world of the uncorrupted keeps them distanced, denying them a space within. The speaker regrets that he too is instrumental in the promotion of corruption. He is hurt that

Corrupted by the world I must infect the world
With my corruption. (8)

Also, as infected the speaker is barricaded from the external world though he is engulfed in richness. Relevant lines from the poem "On Meeting a Pedant" are quoted for reference:

Sunlight warms around him and the summer
Evenings melt in rich fatness on his tongue
But he is rigid, barricaded from
The force of flower or bird by what he reads. (8)

As I mentioned elsewhere, the sense of alienation that sets in after a mismatch of "the Èlan of desire" and the "rational faculties" is individualistic in nature. This mismatch and the consequent feeling of alienation is the subject of another poem that is titled "Emptiness". In the lines quoted below, one may read the despondency:

... .. I am
Waiting now in emptiness
Annulled, cancelled, made a blank,
Resolved to find another way. (11)

Drawing lesson from the engulfing emptiness, the poet is set to

find his way in another direction. In the concluding lines of the poem he makes a statement towards this and the lines are quoted below:

Broken by excesses or by
Lack of them, let me always feel
The presence of the golden mean
Between the Èlan of desire
And the rational faculties,
Brooding on design and colour
Even in emptiness. (12)

The path to be taken is the *via media* between the extremes of Èlan of desire and the rational faculty. The idea is ideal and appears practical as both extremes cannot be rejected from life. This attitude of Ezekiel who tries to resolve problems is not so much found in Layton.

The problem that the poet poses in the poem titled “The Great” is the question of who is the great actually. He wonders whether the great are a different group or the poet himself. The poet holds the great in esteem but regrets that they cannot make him great. The lines quoted below would illustrate the irony behind the truth:

Everyday they live and die in me but still
They cannot make me great. I am alone. (21)

In most of the poems one can read this paradox. He is in company but he is alone. The poet feels that he is alone in spite of the great ‘living’ within him. “Exposed to life”, he is unable to follow the great and, therefore, he is alone. The poem delineates “greatness” in detail and ends in an ironic note as it will be evident from the lines quoted below:

The great provide a pattern for our life,
Illustrate the paradoxes of the real
To which we are exposed, alone. (22)

If in the poem discussed above the poet feels the loneliness, in “Commitment” he wishes to be alone. Being alone need not necessarily lead to loneliness and the poem illustrates this point. He, therefore, wishes to be alone and he has a reason for this:

Futilities suck the marrow from my bones
And put a fever for cash and fame. (26)

He wishes to get rid of the ‘human face’ that he puts on to hide the madness of an animal for fame and money that is latent in him. The poet realizes that he wants to be a man in the real sense of the word and for that he needs to return to the world of simplicities. The lines quoted below would evidence the point:

Truly, I wish to be a man. Alone
Or in the crowd, this is my only guide.
There is a world of old simplicities
To which my calling calls me, turbulence
Is stilled in it and slowly understood... (26)

The poem titled “Speech and Silences” is another statement of the human predicament. Voicing a totally different perception of speech and silence, which are essential for establishing human relationship, Ezekiel writes that:

Man is alone and cannot tell
The simplest thing to any friend
All speech is to oneself, others
Overhear and miss the meaning. (53)

Both speech and silence are indispensable to etch one’s identity. The activities are complements to each other; and both, though, are essential to wipe away loneliness from life and build relationships through interaction, in fact facilitate man to be alone. The complementary nature of speech and silence is evident in the following lines:

In silence is simplicity
Expressed through speech, reality. (54)

In the poem “Confession” Ezekiel underscores the complementary nature of the two sides of life namely the pretended and the real. When he “pretends to be happy”, the poet’s intellect “Boistrously propel” him on and he is in company, playing games and indulging in various other intellectual activities. But finally he would “turn away/ Unsatisfied, to be alone”. In this loneliness, instead of being

depressed or despondent, the poet finds perfection, rationale and a predictable end which is more concrete. The relevant lines are quoted for reference:

And what is in this loneliness?
 Perfection. A fantasy
 Of lucid being, relation
 To a rational crowd, traffic
 Of the heart on images,
 Miracles of love that run to rule,
 And at the end, desolation,
 Which any fool could have foretold. (63)

The desolation at the end is expected, common and nothing special so much so that it shall not disturb the person intensely.

“Lamentation” is poem wherein the poet exposes the loneliness of a fugitive. The two poignant lines quoted below express the plight of the fugitive succinctly:

Fugitive am I and far from home.
 A vagabond and every part of me is withered. (72)

The wise and worldly have advised him but he does not swim with the current and their words are wasted on him. As I said elsewhere, he is so totally cut off that even when he is nourished by the words of the wise, he does not prosper. Knowledge and laws have deserted him so much so that amidst bounty he remains bare. Realizing the condition in which he swirled, he pleads for life. He sounds like the prodigal son who returns after wasting a fine part of his life.

In “Declaration”, Ezekiel’s desire to be absorbed in the crowd is the focus. For the same purpose he keeps away from all that is beyond his reach. Though he takes care to avoid “fragile” and “expensive” matters and enjoys them from a safe distance, his turbulent mind in despair is aware that “possession is necessary” and deprivation self inflicted or inflicted by others leads to despair. The mind of the poet on this matter is very clearly reflected in the following lines:

And deprivation is desolation.
 I have stood in the empty room
 And gazed at crowds in the street,
 Longing to be absorbed –

No moral law can fill the void,
Deaf and blind to all is appetite. (94)

The sense of desolation is the subject of yet another poem titled "Song of Desolation". In this poem he calls religion for help. In order to listen to the moan of the sea which is in correspondence with his inner moaning, the poet goes walking all alone and sits on a rock near the sea. The activities around should in fact clear the "inner block" and help him to be active; but at the end of the day he "Noticed nothing blossom". The agony of desolation having not subsided, he calls religion to see his inner flaws.

At times, one needs to accept loneliness. The poem "Virginal" voices the pretended acceptance of loneliness. In the heart of hearts the girl longs for a lover and a child, though she seemingly has accepted loneliness. Breathing the bitter air of loneliness, the girl pretends to be absorbed in reading. But the ironic paradox is evident in the following lines:

The universe is much too small to hold
Your longing for a lover and a child. (139)

"A Small Summit" is an expression of the poet's desire to be alienated from the crowd and differentiated as an individual. He does not want to be common, one among many, conform to an accepted style or in short, be one in a crowd. His desire to be unique does not permit him to be ordinary. To be different, he would rather suffer the alienation than conform. The line quoted would evidence this:

Do I belong, I wonder,
to the common plain?
A better thought.
I know that I would rather
suffer somewhere else
than be at home
among the accepted styles. (153)

The poet galvanizes his energy to find a fresh path to achieve his goal. The determination towards this is evident in his words which are quoted below:

If nothing else, I'll keep my nerve,

refuse the company of priests,
 professors, commentators, moralists,
 be my own guest in my room
 one-man lunatic asylum,
 questioning the Furies, my patron saints,
 about their old and new obscurities. (153)

The poet chalks out the trajectory of the desire to belong in his poem “At Fifty”. He vividly recalls his desire to belong, to conform in his youth. He says

Youth is a racket. Who can help
 wanting to belong? (170)

As an old person he experiences the same sense of belonging, but not with the people of his age but with the youth. The following lines echo his mind:

I do not want ashes
 of the old fire but the flame itself.

 Given the choice, who would not
 prefer to stay
 among the growing shoots
 instead of shedding leaves. (170)

He wants to belong — belong not with the category to which he naturally should belong but with its opposite.

“Background Casually” is poem that best illustrates the sense of alienation that lies embedded in the poet. As a boy he was never accepted in his peer group, as he tells. Like the boys of his age he never learnt to fly a kite or spin a top. As a Jew he was alienated in school because ‘he’ killed Christ. Christian and Islamic friends refused acceptance into their fold. Again as a grown up person, in London he was alone but for the company of the three namely, philosophy, poetry and poverty. The problem kept itself tagged on to him even after his return home from London. Though by now he learnt to take things on their stride, the crucial issue was “How to feel at home, that was the point”. Back in India he still felt alienated. But as mentioned above, he started learning to live with it because his ancestors were aliens in India:

My ancestors, among the castes
Were aliens crushing seed for bread. (180)

Nevertheless, he accepted India as his place.

I have become part of it
To be observed by foreigners. (181)

In the following lines Ezekiel further confirms his acceptance of the country:

I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am
As others chose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am. (181)

Shirish Chindhade (2001) commenting on this poem, writes in his book *Five Indian English Poets* that,

He has made his commitments, chosen his islands, found his people and identified the five elements of sky, earth, air, water and fire. It is quite gratifying that God has granted him the human metaphor also to make his song good. This is not a mood of submission, or of resignation, or of alienation. It is rather the epiphanic moment of reconciliation, identification, discovery and achievement. (50)

In the above few pages, a scrutiny of the select poems of Ezekiel was made. In the next few pages it then behooves us to examine the poems of Layton.

The poem "O Jerusalem" is the opening piece in Layton's book *Fortunate Exile*. It is a narrative of the experiences of the exiled Jew in Jerusalem. However, the predominant note in the poem is the deep despondency that lies implicit in the last lines of the poem, which is quoted below for reference:

... O Jerusalem
you are too pure and break men's hearts
you are a dream of prophets, not for our clay,
and drive men mad by your promised
impossible peace, your harrowing oracles of love.
and how we may walk upon this earth with forceful
 human stir

unless we adore you and betray? (13)

In these lines the voice of the almost permanent longing of the Jew for the Promised Land is clearly heard. It also hints at the long duration of time that has gone by without the Land and Peace; and the long time ahead which also will not be giving the Jews the Jerusalem of their dream. In all dejection the poet calls the promised peace as “impossible peace”.

The poem “Hear, O Israel” is philosophic. It carries the philosophy of a person who intends to achieve, and at the same is afraid that he might not achieve his goal; and in this context obviously it refers to the “impossible peace”. He perceives that every human being is an exile for the simple reason that the spirit of his/hers belongs to another realm. It is only on a temporary sojourn in the body. And it never belongs to the body forever. Layton’s cynicism is a product of his bitter experiences as a Jew. The fate of the Jews is more or less sealed and the reverberation of the gnawing feeling is echoed in the opening lines itself:

Exiled into the world
you are aliens in it
as Spirit is alien. (14)

Layton’s cynicism that has evolved from his deep sense of loss and betrayal, finds expression in a very open manner in the lines that follow the above ones. Besides saying that the travail which the Jew undergoes in pursuing the Promised Land is an ‘unending’ one, he also hastens to add that the travails of the Jew will mock God. In fact, he says, it was Cosmos that gave life for the Jews in order to expose God’s pretense and callousness in establishing Justice and Love in the world, which in fact should be his primary concern. The lines relevant to the point have been quoted for reference:

You are its embodiment
and your travail here
is an unending refutation

For the Cosmos itself framed you
to mock God’s pretense
to initiate Justice and Love. (14)

The poem has a wider connotation, though the direct reference is

towards the homeless Jews. For the poet, it looks as though God is taking the Jews for a ride giving them false promises of Justice, Love, Peace and a Land of their own; and Cosmos has created the Jews to use them as a tool to expose God. However, both of them are not honest to the Jews since, if God plays tricks with the Jews, Cosmos utilizes them as a tool to expose God's insincerity.

A poet is endowed with the power of creation – the power to create his/her own world. Layton underscores this fact in the poem "Lyric" by saying that he is different from his fellowmen because he 'invents his own world'; and he compares himself to a mole which makes its own burrow, and to a bird which builds its own nest. This world that he creates in the poem is comfortable warm, cosy and secure, just like a burrow or a nest. Nevertheless, his world separates him from his brethren. While his fellow Jews are not able to find a space safe and secure, Layton is able to invent a world of his own and this world provides him with the security and comfort. However, Layton being sensitive, extends his poetic hands to the suffering fellowmen, as it is openly declared in the poem "Whom I Write For":

I write for the gassed, burnt, tortured,
and humiliated everywhere. (16)

The poem "Search", as the title explicitly states is about the search for 'the faintest scent of God'. And this search is one that is relayed from his forefathers. The 'relay', needless to elaborate, only underscores the longevity of the search and the implicit suggestion of the suffering that is undergone by the Jewish community for so long. The relay does not seem to be nearing the end, as one can infer from the poet's taking over and not ending the relay. Also the quoted lines would suggest the almost impossible realization of the goal of finding God who could address their predicament, as the poet is struggling to get the faintest scent of Him:

Alien and bitter the road my forbears knew:
fugitives forever eating unleavened bread
and hated pariahs because of that one Jew
who taught the tenderest Christian how to hate
and harry them to whatever holes they sped. (22)

The Jews were not spared even if they hid themselves in 'holes'! The permanently chasing agony made the Jews even envy the dead.

The irony is that they are hated in the name of Jesus who preached brotherhood.

In another poem titled “The Sign of the Cross” Layton draws the parallel between the agony and suffering of the Jews and Jesus. If Jesus was Crucified, the Jews were also crucified:

... .. the eternal Jew crucified
for freedom and creativity. (43)

The Jews are held guilty for the death of Christ, who too is a Jew and by way of punishment they are denied their roots. The poem “Crucifixion” is in the form of a conversation with an Anglican Priest. In this poem the priest openly accuses the Jews:

you’re all guilty for his death
each one of you, now and always.
... ..
Christ’s death is on every Jew. (46)

And the charge seems to be beyond time — past, present and future. The anger is of such intensity. The poem ends with the gloomy note about the Jews’ predicament: “not Jeshua but each racked Jew is on that cross!”

Gloominess looms large in the poems of Layton. The Holocaust and its aftermath, the continued torture that the Jews are forced to undergo from time immemorial till this day, and the bleakness of the time ahead that is learnt from the present and the past have all seared the very soul of the Jew. It would be very relevant if a few lines from the poem “Reingemacht” are quoted for reference:

The cries and moans never cease.
The cities of the plain are burning
London, Berlin, Vienna, Warsaw, Moscow,
Night after night, they blaze like enormous faggots
against the lowering sky. (77)

The quoted lines clearly state the never-ending nature of the torture inflicted upon the Jew and also the almost universal nature of the torture. The following lines only emphasize the spirit that runs in the lines quoted above:

A hideous smell of gas covers Europe from end to end.

When the cities have burnt themselves out
 the heavens will open up
 and black torrential rains will descend for forty days
 and forty nights.
 Everything alive is submerged and drowned. (77)

If in the previous deluge the species were saved by Noah, this time there will be no survival for any species, since swirling in pain, Layton says, "I see no tossing ark". The despair and frustration that runs through the poem is very intense. Marooned by fire and water an escape, a belonging, a beginning seems impossible.

The Jew is restricted to ghetto. As elaborated in the poem "The Interloper", his movements are restricted to ghettos and the crematoria. He may sing his joy, if he has any, without violating the boundaries of it. In case of such a violation, death awaited him:

Since he persisted in hymning God and Life
 what else could they do
 but murder him? (81)

Layton sees a pattern of life that recurs. And the pattern is not a very positive one, since his vision of humanity is blinkered by hopelessness and despair. However much one tried to better humanity, the ultimate result of the struggle would be doom. This perception of Layton is voiced in his poem "Eternal Recurrence". Layton the poet, the Jew, the mute witness of the atrocities of the Holocaust, encapsulates his disillusionment in these lines:

always his heirs will climb towards the same ruin
 until this creation becomes one vast inertness
 with not a single mind to know its doom. (93)

The frustration further runs through the poem. Even if Abrams comes down from the valleys of his forefathers,

to begin the tragic husking of mankind,
 the reformation of a brute universe
 in all its parts by sentience and love,

his 'heirs' would only remain 'cannibals' devouring 'each others' kidneys and brains'. The goriness and the darkness of Layton's vision can probably be matched only by his own! More than a vision, the

words of Layton appear like an eternal curse on mankind from which, it appears as if, there is no redemption! As history tells us, the Jew seems to be permanently at the receiving end. The poem is an illustration of the hounding agony of rootlessness that cuts across time and space.

A Jew is never free from the memory of the Nazi atrocities against his people. It runs deep in his psyche. The poem “Das Wahre Ich” is a succinct narration of this fear. Even behind the generously extended warmth of the Nazi woman, the poet reads cruelty. The Nazi woman ‘urges’ the poet with tea and biscuit and she offers the same with gladness. The poet does appreciate when he sees ‘her face ... touched by a brief happiness’. At the same time in the heart of hearts he reads a different meaning for the apparent happiness on her face. Having experienced the traumatic Nazi treatment, the poet suspects that behind her smile there is a hidden reason which is truly Nazi in nature:

“At this moment, does she see my crumpled form against
the wall
blood on my still compassionate eyes and mouth?” (106)

Based on his experience, a Jew cannot read genuineness behind a Nazi smile or goodness. It cannot be read as an acceptance and reciprocation of the warmth extended by a Jew, as seen in the poem. Forever the Jew feels targeted.

Being a Jew, Layton identifies himself with the victims of the Holocaust and yearns to be the mouthpiece of the victims. In one of his poems titled “To the Victims of the Holocaust”, he expresses his earnest desire to be the same and requests them permission to be their tongue that curses the Nazis. I quote the relevant lines for reference:

My murdered kin
let me be your parched and swollen tongue
uttering the maledictions
bullets and gas silenced on your lips.

Fill, fill my ears with your direct curses.
I shall tongue them, unappeasable shades,
till the sun burns black in the sky. (108)

The cause of the surging anger in his mind is that he lives “among the blind, the deaf, and the dumb” and among the “amnesiacs”. As

a consequence, he says,

Your terrible deaths are forgotten;
no one speaks of them anymore.

... ..

... people now say
your deaths are pure inventions, a spoof. (108)

The Jews had suffered the utmost cruelties in the hands of the Nazis, the scar of which would naturally last for centuries. This community is one that has been hunted down and butchered from the very early days as the documents speak. Layton identifies himself with the Jews who had met horrible deaths, and with the Jews who were tortured to silence that they not only dare not utter a word about their experience till they die but also do not leave a trace of it speaking to others. The poet fears that this silence would turn against Jews some time in future when people would consider the hearsay of it as spoof. So this needs to be voiced and recorded and thus stamped for authenticity. He does not want to forget anything. Even if the Nazis like to extend warmth, he does not want to accept the same.

The wounds in the heart of Layton are very much afresh which speaks for the depth of the same. In the poem "To the Jewish Dissenters" he laments his pain and it is evident in the lines quoted below:

Always the same story
the Jew against the world (109)

Living in constant fear, their achievements are showed away in 'swift oblivion'. In another poem titled "Anarch" the same vein of pain finds expression. He encapsulates the inner agony of the Jew which is reflected in the following lines:

... .. I'm one
my humanity dooms to gaze at their tall
composed shapes with longing.... (122)

As the poem continues the agony gets intensified. At the close of the poem the poet casts a curse on the heavens:

That must one day blot out the heavens
the agonyof innocents caught like a lynx

in the steel trap of human malice
 or harpooned like those other Jews,
 the harried whales of the prosperous sea. (123)

The poem “Jew” is a short piece which in just a few syllables encapsulates the Jewish predicament. The poem in full is quoted below.

Someone
 who feels himself to be
 a stranger every where
 even in Israel. (135)

Torture undergone by the Jews in the hands of the Nazis is the subject of the poem “The New Sensibility”. The following lines would delineate the point:

Tamed bears
 toothless tigers
 caged lions
 defenseless ghetto Jews
 (Polacks to Nazis in Warsaw circa 1941:
 nab them, nab them, they’re Jews!)
 and poets
 who dish out the familiar idealistic crap
 always make the murderous crowd
 slobber
 preparatory to prodding them with sticks
 and pouring gasoline on their cadavers. (137)

The Jews are hunted and tamed to be butchered. Their plight is something which seems to be permanent and never to be overcome. In view of this situation the Jews even sought their own alienation for their survival. This issue, as Layton perceives, cannot be resolved. Driven to the cul-de-sac of the perennial anti Semitic setting, the Jew will have to learn self defense, no matter the violence imbedded in it. Though, coming from a community in which Jesus who preached non-violence and love was born, the Jew still have to learn to use weapon for self-defense. He suggests the idea to the Jewish scholars who are engaged in resolving the anti Semitic attitude, in the poem “Ha-Nagid’s Admonition to Jewish Scholars”:

Waste no time unriddling the anti-Semite;
 That won't save you when you have to fight or run.
 Learn well in the hours still given to you
 How to slash with a knife, how to fire a gun. (140)

The lines reflect the eternal insecurity of the Jew. He feels that the society is not going to extend warm hands to them and, therefore, it is better that they learn to use weapons for their survival.

In the poem "For My Sons, Max and David", Layton draws a list of the types of sufferings undergone by the Jews. I quote the relevant lines below for reference:

The Wandering Jew; the suffering Jew;
 The despoiled Jew; the beaten Jew;
 The Jew to burn; the Jew to gas;
 The Jew to humiliate. (145)

The Jews are called the chosen people and in the lines quoted above the poet underscores the irony in them being called the chosen people. They seem to be the permanent chosen people of the anti Semitics. As mentioned in the poem, "no one can live with" a Jew; they are a hated lot and "The Jew everyone seeks to destroy". After telling in detail about who a Jew is or what a Jew is, at the end of the poem, Layton cautions his sons: "Be none of these". He urges his sons, instead, to "Be gunners in the Israeli Air Force". The poignant lines in the poem are reflective of the long suffering and humiliation topped with hopelessness of a secure future.

After the scrutiny of the select poems of the two poets, it will be only befitting to sum up the discussion by comparing and contrasting the poets with focus on the subject of the present reading.

Ezekiel may be read as a contrast to Layton. If in many of Layton's poems concern for the Jews predominates, in most of Ezekiel's poems it is the individual and his concerns, especially those related to the self that predominates. Shirish Chindhade, (2001) states that in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel:

...the mood is permanently one of self-absorption, inwardness, introspection: all roads lead to the city within, the city of the soul. There is a consistent attempt at self-search and self-definition. The holy grail of the search is hidden within the soul and poetry affords consolation in such a state of mind. It also helps 'to shape one's inner image silently. (30)

A similar thought has been expressed by Shaila Mahan (2001) in her book *The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel*. She is of the view that:

Ezekiel's poetry can be characterized as intellectually complex. It is essentially ironic, rooted in rationality and common sense. It is both the instrument and outcome of his attempt as a man to come to terms with himself. Being product of restless rational mind Ezekiel's poetry is created from paradox, oppositions and contrasts. In fact his poetry can be seen as the product of contrasting emotions structured into a balance of tensions and stresses. (viii).

Unlike Layton's, as John Thieme (2005) observes, "...his [Ezekiel's] work is centrally concerned with perception and his poetic persona is both that of an observer who regards his social world and his own behavior with a degree of amused detachment, and that of a complete insider."

Poetry, needless to explain, is the product of tension. In Layton the main tension seem to be between the Jew in him and the anti-Semitic world. But with regards to Ezekiel, as Gillian Tindall (2008) rightly observes:

... his work and his life were informed by several sets of tensions, not just between east and west, but between the sense of separation from India and the sense of belonging, between Judaism and unbelief, between thinking of himself as a westernized Indian intellectual (a distinct category in his generation) and knowing himself to be someone at once more exotic, more isolated and still more obscure." (20)

One would also agree with Makarand Paranjape (2008) when he states that:

Nissim's view of life lacks the sense of grand narratives or oracular pronouncements. It is in the everyday, humdrum, even sordid urban landscape of the postcolonial metropolis that he seeks to realize the higher truths of life. No longer is the vision one of saving humanity or saving a nation, but simply of surviving, following a vocation, living authentically. (433)

As a contrast to Ezekiel, Layton infuses his poems with force. In one of his interviews Layton made a statement regarding the birth of his poems. He stated that, "I am a quiet madman, never far from tears, I write poems to cause trouble. The sparks fly, I gather each one, and start a poem." Pertaining to the focus on the Jew and the Holocaust, which hardly finds a place in Ezekiel's poems, Layton stated, "The Holocaust is my symbol... If you read today's poets, you'd never know the kind of barbarous world we live in. A man

forgets what a terrifying monster he can be. I want to keep reminding people how close they are to disaster.” (Gazette, 2013).

The strong opinions and tone in Layton poems have many a time landed him in controversies. For instance, in an article titled “‘Now many will live by your name’: Irving Layton, Memory, and the Holocaust”, Dylan Brethour (2013) accuses Irving of “being an offensively loud distracting presence, with more ambition than talent, whose anger ruins the effectiveness of his Holocaust-related poems” (3). However, Anna Pottier (2013), the wife of Layton, refutes this ‘accusation’ in her Letter to the Editor: A Response to Dylan Brethour’s “‘Now many will live by your name’: Irving Layton, Memory, and the Holocaust”. Quoting a few lines from one of his poems titled “Israelis” Pottier argues as follows:

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. (Cp. 136 qtd . in Pottier, 2008) ... Her (Brethour’s) interpretation of “To the Victims of the Holocaust” (108) 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” has no basis outside her imagination. Who indicates what should inspire a poet? By what law does a poet who uses the “lyrical” 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’ and asks them to let him “be their parched and swollen tongue”. He asks the victims for their “direct curses” and promises that he will utter them ‘unappeasable shades, till the sun turns black in the sky’ Layton serves merely as vocal conduit, the exact opposite of the egomaniac that haunts Brethour like a gloom. Layton’s use of the word ‘unappeasable’ is a heart-wrenching acknowledgement of the magnitude and inexpressibility of the victim’s pain. (5-6)

One cannot but agree with Pottier when she further argues:

... 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. (ibid.: 6) 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 shared in the vast kaleidoscope of Jewish history. The great danger, when understanding of and appreciation for Jewish history and culture – including the Shoag – is lacking, is that their mass slaughter remains little more than an irritating abstraction, a big “So what?” (ibid.: 9)

Almost all his poems in the collection *Fortunate Exile* are powerful, loud outpourings of the pain and concern in his heart that is consequent to the heard and seen sufferings of the Jews. The title of the collection chosen for the analysis *Fortunate Exile*, itself makes it evident that the exile is fortunate and not condemnable, and that it has enabled the Jew to live free from the anti-Semitic clutch.

To sum up the discussion that went ahead, it could be said of Layton that his poems are strong emotional expressions of the acutely felt sense of deprivation, subsequent to the almost permanent social exclusion his race felt. He yearns to belong to a Jewish community that has its own place, milieu. Settled in Canada, which claims multiculturalism, he is unable to enjoy the unifying thread expected to be present in a society of the kind. The milieu in which the poet is groomed is yet to assuage his fears of Holocaust.

On the other hand, Ezekiel though belonging to the same race does not express such fears of non-belongingness as a Jew. Though, he too is uprooted and has adopted another country namely, India, as his place he seems to feel the sense of alienation not as an uprooted Jew but as the modern, common man, or as any Indian would feel at any time. His backward place seems to have given him a better milieu with its natural tolerance and secularism which has enabled the flourishing of various alien cultures and beliefs. As a result of this mutual acceptance in the case of Ezekiel, his poems do not carry the severe, harsh tone that is found in the poems of Layton.

The discussion could be ended by quoting the words of the two poets themselves, which would succinctly speak their respective poetic minds.

In an interview to Harry Blamirs, Layton said, “My country is wherever there are concrete objects to touch, taste, feel and enjoy” (155). Almost in a similar tone Ezekiel opens out his mind in his quarrel with Naipaul and I quote his words: “In India which I have presumed to call mine, I acknowledge without hesitation the existence of all the darkness Mr. Naipaul has discovered. I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider: circumstances and decisions relate me to India. In other countries

I am a foreigner. In India I am an Indian” (xxii). If Layton considers any place that is ‘comfortable’ as his place, Ezekiel considers, India as his place, no matter what its shortcomings are. The difference between the poets, then, is the milieu and therefore, the moment as well, though the race is the same and their poems are reflections of this fact.

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