Philip Levine (1928–2015): A poet of working class life and struggle

Dorota Niemitz, Matthew Brennan
5 March 2015

The poet Philip Levine died on February 14, at the age of 87, in Fresno, California. Levine's poetry is often associated with depictions of industrial working class life and struggle, particularly in and around Detroit.

Born in Detroit in 1928 to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents, Levine himself was a factory worker for more than a decade, beginning at the age of 14. Among the factory and industrial jobs he held in the Detroit area were ones at the Cadillac Engine, Chevrolet Gear and Axle, and Wyandotte Chemical factories.

In his early teens Levine was initially inspired by poetry after reading Wilfred Owen's anti-war poem *Arms and the Boy*. He later enrolled in the English department at Wayne State University, and became interested in Keats, Whitman, Hardy, William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane. He noted the connection between his work life and his growing artistic aspirations in an interview with Studs Terkel. "I was working in factories and also trying to write. I said to myself, 'Nobody is writing the poetry of this world here; it doesn't exist.' And it didn't. You couldn't find it. And I sort of took a vow to myself … I was going to write the poetry of these people."

In 1953 Levine enrolled in the University of Iowa Writing program, studying under the poets Robert Lowell and John Berryman. He considered Berryman his "one great mentor" in poetry, and speaks movingly of him in his autobiography *The Bread of Time*. Pursuing an academic career, he eventually became a professor of literature at Fresno State University in 1958, a position he held until he retired in 1992.

Levine's published body of poetry spans from 1961 (*On The Edge*) to 2009 (*News of the World*). Some of his more well-known books of poetry include *Not This Pig* (1963), *They Feed They Lion* (1974), *The Names of the Lost* (1976), *A Walk With Tom Jefferson* (1988), and *The Simple Truth* (1995). He won a Pulitzer Prize for this last work. Capping a long list of literary awards received over his lifetime, he was named the Poet Laureate of the United States for 2011–2012.

Levine's poetry and poetic style, at its best, captured the complexity and beauty behind the harsh exterior of social life for working people. Often his poems depicted daily urban American life through both chaotic and mundane images—the factories, smog and soil, the smell of bread, eggs and butter, grease and sweat, fevered children, snowstorms, cluttered diesel truck cabins, an assembly press malfunction, a winter-beaten garden, or a mother's work clothes. He could tell a genuinely moving story and evoke honest imagery without sliding into sentimentality.

Back-breaking work, dreams, drudgery and love could find sudden, unexpected intersection in his poems. Take for instance, parts of "What Work Is," or "Of Love and Other Disasters:"

We stand in the rain in a long line
waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.
You know what work is—if you're
old enough to read this you know what
work is, although you may not do it.
(…)
The sad refusal to give in to
rain, the hours wasted waiting,
to the knowledge that somewhere ahead
a man is waiting who will say 'No,
we're not hiring today,' for any
reason he wants. You love your brother,
now suddenly you can hardly stand
the love flooding for your brother,
who's not beside you or behind or
ahead because he's home trying to
sleep off a miserable night shift
at Cadillac so he can get up
before noon to study his German (…)

- from "What Work Is"

The punch press operator from up north
met the assembler from West Virginia
in a bar near the stadium
(...)
how the grease ate so deeply into her skin it became
a part of her, and she put her hand,
palm up, on the bar and pointed
with her cigarette at the deep lines
the work had carved. "The lifeline,"
he said, "which one is that?" "None,"
she said (…)"

- from "Of Love and Other Disasters"

Levine's appeal was also due in part to the accessibility and directness of his free-verse poems, which relied on familiar, accurate, and authentic language –all the more impressive in an era (the 1960s through early 1990s) when postmodernism and its impenetrable jargon began to find significant influence in literature and art.

Memory, nostalgia, grief and anger were central, for better and worse, to Levine's narrative approach. Most often his characters live in all three spaces of time across a poem. People and places that no longer exist are brought back to life in the present, and their dreams are projected onto the future, or up against the lack of a discernible future.

His best poems often emphasize tension between visual motifs—such as everyday objects, people or well-known places—and the non-visual

elements they evoke in the sounds or feelings of a place or time. In "Those Were The Days" he writes about young boys imagining a hearty breakfast served on silver plates on a sunny day, before being dragged back into reality by their mother, without the food, putting on their galoshes and heading off to school in freezing November rain.

In "Salt and Oil" the elements of the poem's title become opposing symbols for capturing the "unwritten biography of your city … There is no/ photograph, no mystery/ only Salt and Oil/ in the daily round of the world,/ three young men in dirty work clothes/ on their way under a halo/ of torn clouds and famished city birds./ There is smoke and grease, there is/ the wrist's exhaustion, there is laughter,/ there is the letter seized in the clock."

His compassion and humane treatment of his subjects are Levine's strongest qualities, with his sympathies almost always clearly directed toward the exploited, overworked and weary people of his poems. In the haunting "Detroit, Tomorrow" for instance, Levine describes a mother who contemplates "how she'll go back to work today" after her only child has been killed ("You and I will see her just before four/ alight nimbly from the bus, her lunch box/ of one sandwich, a thermos of coffee, a navel orange secured under her arm …").

Or in "Among Children," from a classroom of 4th grade schoolchildren in Flint, Michigan, he considers their fathers working in spark plug factories or water plants, their mothers waiting in old coats, and worries what the future brings ("You can see already how their backs have thickened, how their small hands, soiled by pig iron, leap and stutter even in dreams").

One could easily list a dozen other poems evoking very human qualities in Levine's poetry.

However, while his ability to movingly render the lives of "everyday people" and the grinding nature of work is admirable, those of his poems that move onto political and historical terrain point to some of Levine's weaknesses. Here a tendency toward pessimism and resignation emerges most clearly.

Some of his most well-known poems—"They Feed They Lion" and "Animals Are Passing From Our Lives," about racial tensions and the 1967 Detroit Riots, or "Francisco, I'll Bring You Red Carnations" about events in the Spanish Civil War—are among his least effective.

Some of this can be explained in Levine's world outlook. Throughout most of his life he identified himself as an anarchist. He dedicates numerous poems and essays to vignettes and to anarchist figures of the Spanish Civil War—a struggle he considered the most important of the 20th century. Many of these are captured in *The Names of the Lost* and in a chapter of his autobiography ("The Holy Cities").

The themes of the more "political poems"—heroic individualism, defiance in the face of long odds, idealist notions of a better world—are generally passive and even demoralized. They lack a conception of the material and social basis of the revolutionary struggle. The poem "To Cipriano, In The Wind" is an apt illustration. Cipriano is the name of the Italian dry cleaner who inspired Levine's turn toward anarchism as a youth. The poem is a discouraged longing for that particular idealism as it fades away in old age. Another poem, "The Communist Party," about a CP meeting in Detroit in the late 1940s, illustrates a certain lack of seriousness with which he approached questions of history.

"*Were we simply idealists?*
What I'm certain of is something essential
was missing from our lives, and it wasn't
in that sad little clubhouse for college kids,
it wasn't in the vague talk, the awful words
that spun their own monotonous music:
"proletariat," "bourgeoisie ," "Trotskyist."

There is an underlying element of retreat and defeat—of an individual "screaming in the wind"—in many of Levine's poems, even in some of the warmer compositions. In a *Paris Review* interview towards the end of his life he stated as much, despite his hatred of imperialist oppression. "Those who have dominated our country most of my adult life are interested in maintaining an empire," he said, "subjugating other people, enslaving them if need be, and finally killing those who protest so that wealthy and powerful Americans can go on enjoying their advantages over others. I'm not doing a thing about it. I'm not a man of action; it finally comes down to that. I'm not so profoundly moral that I can often overcome my fears of prison or torture or exile or poverty. I'm a contemplative person who goes in the corner and writes. What can we do?"

Large historical issues of the 20th century—the significance of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent betrayals of Stalinism, the global crisis of capitalism, the transformation of the trade unions into adjuncts of big business and the capitalist state, the dead-end of nationalism—would be difficult to navigate for even the sharpest of artists. Levine's anarchism left him virtually powerless to bring these issues to life in his poetry.

His focus on the details of life in and around working class neighborhoods led one cultural critic to dub Levine the "large, ironic Whitman of the industrial heartland." This description is somewhat misleading, however. It is indisputable that over the course of a lifetime Levine captured the episodes, dreams, daily routines, tragedies, disputes and complex interactions of working class lives in moving fashion. But his overall outlook is often shrouded by the view that life will never get any better. He is less of a fighter and optimist than Whitman, but Levine was no less sympathetic to his subjects than that poetic giant who preceded him by more than a century. He should be read and remembered for trying to give voice to the largely "voiceless" in industrial America.