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

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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
and in a chapter of his autobiography ("The Holy

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.