

**THE PROLETARIAN FATHER: AN IMAGE
SCULPTED IN PHILIP LEVINE'S MEMORY IN
SELECTED POEMS**

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Abstract

Post-Modern American poetry is thematically diverse. It is distinguished by its social themes of familial relationships, class relations and the impact of memory in the United States. Class identity is a lived experience, a set of relationships, expectations, and legacies. It is a probe into social inequalities, and economic stratifications. The poetry that illuminates such experience and relationships reveals class as a shaping force. Poetry in such context tends to be a cultural expression, responsive to economic and historical changes. What culminates Philip Levine's poetry is its treatment of social justice that is galvanized by his belonging to the working class and the power of his memories towards his people's suffering. The memories of the poet echo a class-based undertone. He descends from a lower-class Russian-Jewish immigrant family who survived through difficult times and harsh circumstances. Consequently his voice, partly confessional and partly autobiographical, documents his father's efforts in bestowing a decent life upon his family and documents the suffering of the American lower class taken his father as a stereotype of his people.

Keywords: Philip Levine, American labor poetry, confessional poetry, autobiographical poetry.

ArticleHistory:

Received

04/05/2019

**Received in
revised form**

04/05/2019

Accepted

29/06/2019

Available online

30/06/2019

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Introduction

Let's bless

the visionary power of the human—
the only animal that's got it—,
bless the exact image of your father
dead and mine dead, bless the images
that stalk the corners of our sight
and will not let go.

Philip Levine, *The Simple Truth*

Philip Levine was born in 1928. His parents, Harry Levine and Esther Gertrude Prisco were Russian-Jewish immigrants who had met in Detroit, the city of Philip's birth. He was reared among the working class in the same city, and although he received a B.A. in 1950 and then an M.A. in 1955 from Wayne State University, he carried on his manual labour. Levine worked in a number of blue-collar jobs specifically Detroit's automobile factories while earning his degrees. His blue-collar experiences during this time helped to solidify the fidelity he already felt to the working class and exhibited themselves in his poetry which attacked avaricious capitalists as frequently as it celebrated the lowly wage-earner (Ruby and Milne, 2000, p. 213). He points out:

I have said elsewhere that I tried to write poetry for people for whom there is no poetry, and I believe that is true even though I said it twenty years ago. Those were the people of Detroit, the people I grew up with who brothered, sistered, fathered, and mothered me and lived and worked beside me. Their presence seemed utterly lacking in the poetry I inherited at age twenty, so I have spent the last forty-some years trying to add to our poetry what was not there. (Quoted in Miola, 2001, p. 694)

Levine's own desire to be a writer was "in large part formed by the hard scrabble working world in which he grew up" (Ruby and Milne, 2000, p. 213). Although he showed a great accolade to the working-class people of Detroit's factories, a different life for him was sought after. "I was resentful of the factory work I had to do," he once told an interviewer, "partly because I saw it as something that was either going to delay my arrival into the kingdom of poetry or deny my entry" (Lehman, 2001, p. 849).

Philip Levine's best-known poetry deals with working-class subject matters in an industrial setting, frequently the Detroit of his upbringing. He could be described as a poet of humanity in general because his "verse honors the endurance of the human spirit in the midst of harsh exterior conditions, endowing the silenced with voices that transcend material circumstance" (Jewell, 2005, p. 278). He has been influenced by the spacious verse of Walt Whitman to the extent that his poems contain a carefully controlled, rhythmic energy expressive of personal and collective freedom. Moreover, Whitman's energetic phrases such as "Vivas for those who have failed" are latent in Levine's poetic spirit that his poetry is the speech for the speechless and an encouragement for the disappointed (Finn, 2004, p. 131). Levine's poems take on a quiet, conversational tone. Chris Semansky attributes Levine's use of free verse, narrative style,

and colloquial language to the poet's proletarian and autobiographical subjects (Semansky, 2000, p. 226). Because of a characteristic intensity of emotion as well as a subsequent break with traditional forms, Levine places himself among those poets of the late 1950s and early 1960s, including several poets of post-confessional and deep image poetry (Jewell, 2005, p. 278).

The poet's arrival to the kingdom of poetry as mentioned above is haunted by working class atmosphere climaxed by the memory of his father. Edward Hirsch, in his "The Visionary Poetics of Philip Levine and Charles Wright" appeared in *The Columbia of History of American Poetry*, ascribes "the fundamental psychological shock at the heart of Levine's work - its first reverberating loss- is the death of the father". He ends in that "indeed, the death of the father stands as the authoritative absence at the heart of his poetry" (Hirsch, 1993, pp. 782-783). The motif of the absent father or the lost father recurs frequently in his poetry. The following are three poems: "Father", "Starlight", and "Words" selected to revivify the memory of Levine's father in a proletarian context.

2. The Analytical Traces of the Image of "the Proletarian Father"

In *Ashes*, a collection of poems published in 1979, Levine broaches the subject of his father on the hope that he can find an ancestral root. Unwillingly, he ends it with a poem about his father, an indication that he needs to dig deep to find these ancestral lines. It is worthy to stop at his poem "Father" in the collection and to ruminate the dynamic father image which moves from past to present. Its opening highlights the essential hidden presence of the father in the life of the child poet:

The long lines of the diesels
Groan towards evening
Carrying off the breath
Of the living.
The face of your house
Is black,
It is your face, black
And fire bombed
In the first street wars,
A black tooth planted in the earth
Of Michigan
And bearing nothing,
And the earth is black,
Sick on used oils. (1-14)

The industrial setting tends to be nightmarish in the eyes of a child lost and scary, looking for his father. The poet envisages the absence of his father in a proletarian landscape when referring to working sites filled with diesels and used oils in Michigan, an industrial city of automobile factories (Semansky, 2000, p. 224). The image of a lost-

stricken child pervades both the poet's memory and the poem itself. The child re-asks and ponders that his father is coming soon believing that the father is looking for him. However, the long absence of the father leads to a frustrated case and increases the child's doubt:

Did you look for me in that house
behind the sofa
where I had to be?
in the basement where the shirts
yellowed on hangers?
in the bedroom
where a woman lay her face
on a locked chest? (15-22)

It is worth mentioning that the poet's father died when the poet was young, an age in which he could not comprehend the meaning of death:

I waited
at windows the rain streaked
and no one told me. (23-25)

The phases of maturity and adulthood impose a harsh reality on the poet to accept life as it is. The child poet now is adult enough to reassess the absence and the circumstances that darkened his father's life. The undertone of class is indirectly referred to here where the poet's father was victimized by class system that sieged the lower-class people who were left to be torn by harsh reality and kept looking forward to any chance to change their miserable reality:

I found you later
face torn
from The History of Siege,
eyes turned to a public wall
and gone
before I turned back, mouth
in mine and gone. (26-32)

The History of Siege is a document to witness the long historical dimension of victimization and belittlement that the working class underwent; a class with "eyes" laden by downfall and marginalization waited for long time at the gates of the "public wall" to be opened and *do* justice to their status. The note of grief springs from the poet's heart and memory alike. Hirsch elaborates that "the speaker moves between the past and the present to show managing grief makes us who we are" (Hirsch, 1993, p. 224):

I found you whole
Toward the autumn of my 43rd year
In this chair beside
A mason jar of dried zinnias
And I turned away.

I find you
In these tears, few,
Useless and here at last.
Don't come back. (33-41)

"Don't come back", a sudden reversal of his longing for his father, ends the poem. The sorrowful poet, after his long quest for his father, solaces himself that the death of his father is final and the absence is real. He accepts this truth with grief. After realizing the sordid reality of his father's life and his lower-class exhaustion, he cries "don't come back" despite the deep yearning and years of orphanhood. The reconciliation comes later with the poem "Lost and Found" from *Ashes: Poems New and Old* (Levine, 1979). The poem ends the collection where he accepts that "certain losses seem final" but highlights that "for now, the lost are found". Richard Jackson elaborates that "as dawn approaches to correct what had seen to be an endless night, he exclaims triumphantly 'for now, the lost are found' This moment 'for now' with its colloquial sense of a tentative and temporary holding off of opposing forces, suggests how Levine's moments, his poems, are never fixed or final" (Jackson, 1989, p. 160). The poet finally, at age 43, consents to the death as a mortal fact but never stops immortalizing his father.

"Starlight" from *Ashes: Poems New and Old* (Levine, 1979), recalls the embrace the poet lost in his world of childhood. The poem has a confessional tone, memorising and imagining an experience from Levine's innocent days with his deceased father when a short dialogue was recounted between the father and the son about happiness. Although empathy overwhelms the dialogue, a proletarian sphere is set by a deep hidden anger that can be felt implied very often; the poem underlines a class undertone through glimpses of tiredness and sighs.

The title "Starlight" provokes in the reader a sense of insight and wisdom as the image of light traditionally symbolizes. Another reading could be suggested that his father and the case of the working-class is the light that have lightened Levine's poetic career toward the kingdom of poetry as he alludes above:

My father stands in the warm evening
on the porch of my first house.
I am four years old and growing tired. (1-3)

Levine, here, arouses a domestic scene with echoes of weariness and tiredness. The word "warm" may have both literal and symbolic meaning. Nevertheless, the emotional familial atmosphere is brought to the scene from these first lines. Yet, the speaker who is the poet himself, is in the age of innocence growing toward that of experience according to Blake's terms:

I see his head among the stars,
the glow of his cigarette, redder
than the summer moon riding
low over the old neighbourhood. We
are alone, and he asks me if I am happy.
"Are you happy?" I cannot answer. (4-9)

The technique of presenting the images from the memory of the speaker when he was a child is similar to the method of stream of consciousness. Depicting the images depends on the thoughtful observations. The memory drives are imbued with waves of intimacy and pangs of nostalgia. The father's question "Are you happy?" to the four-year old son reveals his painful endurance and suffering in such a class-based society:

I do not really understand the word,
and the voice, my father's voice, is not
his voice, but somehow thick and choked,
a voice I have not heard before, but
heard often since. He bends and passes
a thumb beneath each of my eyes. (10-15)

The child-poet in these lines fails to comprehend the distinction between sadness and happiness for he is still innocent where there is no sadness to understand happiness. Yet, he recalls the tone of his father's voice which expresses the inexpressible and speaks the speechless. Being one of the working class there is an air of deep pain and sacrifice; his father's aim is to make his family happy despite his suffering. This event also suggests that the father is emotional and is intensified when the son re-asks his father, "... Are you happy? I say. / He nods in answer, Yes! Oh yes! Oh yes!"(22-23). Megan Swihart Jewell demonstrates one of Levine's poetic traits that he endows "the silenced with voices that transcend material circumstance"(Jewell, 2005, p. 278). The repetition of the word "yes" bears various connotations. Here, the repetition suggests the repressed suffering of the working class, their rights and their defeated stand in front of the violations of the system:

And in that new voice he says nothing,
holding my head tight against his head,
his eyes closed up against the starlight,
as though those tiny blinking eyes
of light might find a tall, gaunt child
holding his child against the promises
of autumn, until the boy slept
never to waken in that world again. (23-31)

These lines suggest the renewal of the father through his son. Like the Phoenix, the father is reborn. Through his own son, he becomes a child again. The speaker, too, experiences renewal through his own memory of his childhood experience. "The voice, my father's voice, is not his voice, but somehow thick and choked,"(11-12) is renewed through his son's. Working-class voice "springs out of 'mundane' communication with the self-inner-voice discourse." (Kirk, 2007, p. 7) The inner discourse is the outcome of depressed lives of the working-class families.

Levine's father seems physically dead but spiritually alive in the son's memory. In "words" (Levine, 1979, p. 61-63) from Levine's collection of poetry *7 Years from Somewhere* appeared in 1979, Levine speaks his father's sighs and sufferings adopting his father's first person point of view. Here Levine adopts the role of an aged working-class father who appears deprived of having real communication with his family especially his busy son who hardly has time to rest from work. Salient silence dominates the domestic atmosphere:

Another dawn, leaden
and cold. I am up
alone, searching
again for words
that will make
some difference
and finding none,
or rather finding these
who do not
make a difference.
I hear my son
waking for work—
he is late and doesn't
have time for coffee
or *hello*. The door
closes, a motor
turns over, and once
more it's only
me and the gray day. (1-19)

The lost days of work and the retirement without pension are not as painful as his separation from his family members. The message Levine attempts to delineate is that children are as susceptible as their elderly. Here the father aspires to have time to spend with his son who hardly says hello. Alienation and familial separation because of the burden of work and the living needs are obstacles of communications among family members. Other deprivations are poking to the extent that the working-class father is chained without manacles and tied without ropes. It is class confinement where class members are no more than prisoners:

I want to rise above
nothing, not even you.
I want to love women
until the love burns
me alive. I want
to rock God's daughter
until together we
become one wave

of the sea that brought
 us into being. I
 want your blessing,
 whoever you are who
 has the power to give
 me a name for
 whatever I am. I want
 you to lead me to
 the place within me
 where I am every
 man and woman, the trees
 floating in the cold haze
 of January, the small
 beasts whose names
 I have forgotten, the ache
 I feel to be no
 Longer only myself. (40-64)

The poet proves very keen to be the voice of his people and his father is the inspiring motif empowering the loyal son to voice loudly the aches that obsess the working-class life. Levine "maintained a loyalty to his roots and a political sympathy for those who are trapped by one form or another of dehumanizing power" (Coles and Zandy, 2007, p. 670).

To conclude, Levine's distinguishing position lies in documenting more diverse facets of working-class life amid industrial milieu than any post-modern American poet. The blue-collar poet is the trophy that tinted his writing. Marxism can be clearly applicable on most of his oeuvre due to his preoccupation with class themes and societal matters but he champions humanity to be his wider umbrella. He is aware of the threats of greed of the capitalistic system to disenfranchise lower classes when he once in a personal interview declares:

But living in the American class system, I see greed running so rampant.
 Now that the capitalist system has learned how to control the political
 system, I think most Americans are disenfranchised, and – you know –
 some powerful shake-up is going to be required to make this the kind of
 country that we hope to live in. If people want to identify me as a
 Marxist, it doesn't give me a moment's problem as long as they don't call
 me a Stalinist. (Rumiano, 2007, p. 154)

His people's harsh reality and his father's memory leap frequently to cast shadows on his poetry and to be then the impetus and the latent motif for his later poems. The drives of memory headed by the remembrance of his father appeared exquisite in paving the way for his career. In a time replete of themes revolve around fashionable movements and

eccentric trends, Levine chooses the familiar and adheres to the traditional because his poetry is not more for poetry's sake than for his people's sake. He resorts to dehumanizing the corrupt capitalistic society by giving voice to the blue-collar communities whose voice has been for so long oppressed due to the alienation and belittlement. In the poems consulted above, the absence of a father and the search of a father unify his poems and at the same time offer the importance of a leader that can unify the family and, by extension, the working class. The recurring images and the flashing memories are functioned well to enhance that unity.

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