

On Philip Levine's *Breath: The Shiver of Mortality*

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In previous papers I had tried to cover most of the major books of poetry that Philip Levine had written to date and tried to analyze the themes and styles that evolved and persisted. His poetry previous to 1988 seemed to have as one of its overriding themes the tragedy of the death of his father when the poet was five and the emotional aftermath and economic hardship that followed, all of this leading to the young Levine's having to resort to dehumanizing physical labor in the factories of Detroit, which ironically turned out to be the impetus for his later becoming the de facto poet of blue collar workers, championing their humanity while at the same time espousing anarchistic rhetoric that condemned the corrupt capitalistic society that led to their plight. (Toskar, 1990)

When I looked at how Levine delved further into the particular social and economic situation particular to Detroit and the black riots that enveloped it in 1976 in his book *A Walk with Tom Jefferson* (1988), I found that he was putting forth a unique sort of romanticism through which he showed how an ordinary man of mythic, biblical strength even, an uneducated black working man, rose out of the rubble that Detroit was left in to triumph over his environment and all of his personal tragedies as well, a modern day Job if you will, a man who held onto his connection to the earth, as well as his connection to his God in that urban wasteland. (Toskar, 1994)

With his publication of *What Work Is* in 1991, Levine seemed to delve further into his preoccupation with the working class, only this time he seemed to mellow his stance against society, against bigotry, with a more philosophical acceptance of suffering, at times replacing his biting irony with love. (Toskar, 1993)

In *The Simple Truth* (1995), Levine further developed his long-established themes, but what I found in this volume was not quite a repudiation of his stylistic debt to García Lorca, but a most definite movement away from poetic ambiguity to clarity, as the title might seem to imply. The book is nonetheless a testament to the transforming power of the imagination (an echo of his own brand of romanticism that was espoused in *A Walk with Tom Jefferson*) and how it can transform, recreate man. (Toskar, 2001)

With *The Mercy* (1999), Levine was still reaching back into his past, still mining the characters that populated his life and memory, but in that volume he was also confronting one of the most difficult themes for a poet, that of the limitation of language itself to due justice to what lay in his memory, what lay in his heart, one more time confronting the long-before death of his father and

the recent death of his mother at 94. (Toskar, 2002)

So coming to this most recent volume we must ask: How has Levine developed his art, his themes? In *Breath* (2004) we find many poems that seemingly could have come out of any of Levine's twenty or so previous volumes of poetry. As a poet of memory, "Levine not only harvests memories, he cultivates them... The dead speak through life in many of Levine's works." (Yarbrough) We see memory upon memory played out in this volume as in virtually all of Levine's previous works. "What gives Levine's work its urgency is that impulse to commemorate, the need to restore to life people who were never, despite their deadening work, dead things themselves, and who deserve to be rescued from the longer death of being forgotten." (Rafferty) But there is a difference in this work, if only in degree:

What may separate this volume from some of Levine's previous work is the shiver of mortality. As he moves through his seventies, he reaches back to previous themes and memories: family, work, and death. He also writes about where he is now--an aged man with a poet's sharpened and developed sensibilities. (Yarbrough)

Here we have, as in poems of the past, numerous elegies for those who have died or succumbed, yet not just the people, but the places as well:

The fiery Detroit riots of 1967 coincided roughly with the publication of Levine's first major book, "Not This Pig," and they loom over many of the poems in "Breath" like a telltale pall of smoke. What must it do to a poet to know that the houses you grew up in, the jazz joints you knew are all cinders, with only you to redeem them? If Levine hadn't been an elegist already, 1967 would have made him one. (Kipen)

This theme of loss to the riots echoes in "On a Photograph of Simon Karady," one of many "uncles" that appear in the poems:

Who was he?
I've asked myself again and again.
Was there some mystery in his coming,
the sudden tangible presence

in our lives? There's no one to ask.
Even the house is gone, burned in '67,
taking my childhood with it.

But there is more to this sense of loss, this endless searching to recover whatever can be recovered from the past. A thematic undercurrent in the volume is the search (either recognized or not) for self, for self-meaning, self-knowledge, for answers to life's most basic questions. The poem ends with the ironic recognition that however hard we might try to know others, it is most pointedly our own selves that we will never know:

The ring stood
for him, I thought, but each time I read it
I read it differently, and each time
I learned nothing. In the photo
his coarse hair combed back reveals
the eyes naked and welcoming,
the dark skin drawn tight across
the high Slavic cheekbones if Slavic
they were, the face of an anarchist
or a Jewish saint. He was who he was.
The harder question, the one with no
answer then or now, is *who was I*.

This paradox of searching for answers that never come or come too late is very evident in "The Great Truth," where Levine is trying to track down yet another "uncle" from the old neighborhood, Uncle Nate. As a child, Levine wished to know the secrets of adult life from this man who came back from prison only to take a "murderous night job in the forge room / at Cadillac." The child he was then needed to know the motivations, the hopes of this enigmatic figure in order to understand his own life:

Whatever he was looking for
he never said, and I was too young to ask.
Eleven then, a growing boy, I believed
there were answers. I believed one morning
he'd turn suddenly to tell me why men and boys

went into such forbidding places or pacing
beside him, I would see some transformation
up ahead where the sky, faceless and gray, hung
above the pin oaks, and know for once the world
was not the world, that the breath battering
my ears and catching in my chest was more
than only my breath.

The poem ends seemingly after the death of Uncle Nate, whom Levine had not seen since seventeen years previously in a bar, and at that time Nate did not even recognize him at first. As Levine was walking alone on an island in the Detroit River where the older man used to come, seemingly trying to make sense of life and death and the meaning of people in our lives, he says:

I felt foolish
under a huge black umbrella, but no one else
was out to see me, so I went on into a stand
of new spruce and hemlock gleaming in the rain
that drummed softly into last year's dead needles.
Up ahead what little I could see of sky
lightened as though urging me toward something
waiting for me more than half a century, some
great truth to live by now that it was too late
to live in the world other than I do.

It seems that even the nebulous answers we get come too late to be of any use.

The most obvious image that endures through the poetry of this volume is that of breath, appearing in numerous poems with various thematic nuances. Obviously, poetry as a spoken art depends on the breath, just as so many of the references to jazz that appear in the poems also allude to the power of breath, or the loss of that power:

Breath takes its name not from any particular poem here, but from a noun that crops up in almost all of them. We hear it in the book's haunting epigraph, 'Some days I catch a rhythm, almost a song in my own breath,' which Levine borrows from the first lines of "Call It Music," the lovely last poem in the book. We hear it in a dozen other poems as well. Over and over the word comes back, as if the book

were one long sestina, and the recurrence of 'breath' all dictated by the form.
(Kipen)

It should be noted that the use of "breath" as an image is not new to this volume by any means. One of Levine's best poems, "Starlight," uses the image in a way very similar to how it is used in the current volume. In "Starlight," the four-year-old Levine says of his father: "The cigarette is gone, but I can smell / the tiredness that hangs on his breath." (Levine, 1983, p. 35) In this volume, the story of two lovers meeting after their shifts at work, "The Two," begins this way:

When he gets off work at Packard, they meet
outside a diner on Grand Boulevard. He's tired,
a bit depressed, and smelling the exhaustion
on his breath, he kisses her carefully
on her left cheek.

In this volume, Levine "discovers in these lives [of those he elegizes] something fluid and songlike, the rhythm of their vanished breath." (Rafferty) But taken to its logical conclusion, a variation on that theme leads to its negative extreme, the loss of breath, mortality. "Moradian," is such a poem about a childhood friend who went off to fight in the Pacific during WWII and never came back, and the fear of mortality is poignantly felt in terms of breath:

Somewhere
there must be a yellowing photograph
of a black-haired boy in shorts, shy, smiling,
already looking away, there must be
a pile of letters to someone, useless words
that said what every boy has to say or,
if they're gone, a sister who recalls
his early needs, those breathless cries
each of us stifles. He can't just be me,
smaller now than I, his damp hands empty,
his breath my breath, his silence also mine
in the face of our life, he just can't be.

The cold breath of mortality is unmistakable in so many of these poems, but there is an in-

teresting counterpoint in how it is expressed in the first poem of the volume, “Gospel,” and in a poem a few pages later, “The West Wind.” In “Gospel” Levine is walking up into the hills and says, “I don’t / ask myself what I’m looking for. / I didn’t come for answers to a place like this.” He then relates how he has “a crushed letter from a woman / I’ve never met bearing bad news I can do nothing about.” But it is the music of the wind in the pines, the breathing of the pines that is resonant in this first poem, only to be understood with dramatic irony in the later poem. “Gospel” ends with an almost empty answer to the questions Levine thought he was not looking for:

The pines make
a music like no other, rising and
falling like a distant surf at night
that calms the darkness before
first light. “Soughing” we call it, from
Old English, no less. How weightless
words are when nothing will do.

Several pages later, “The West Wind” starts:

When the winter wind
moves through the ash trees
in my yard I hear
the past years calling
in the pale voices
of the air. The words,
caught in the branches,
echo a moment
before they fade out.

The poem then moves on to its somber conclusion a few lines later:

Suddenly
at my back I feel
a new wind come on,
chilling, relentless,
with all the power

of loss, the meaning
unmistakable.

So, the shiver of mortality is present from the beginning of the volume and echoes throughout.

Yet of all the poems in *Breath*, those that are most unusual, most surprising for Levine, are two series of what can only be called American sonnets in the vein of Gerald Stern. (Johnson) Stern had taken the original 14-line format of the sonnet and reformulated it into something longer, about twenty lines, while retaining the original spirit of the sonnet, “Italian for ‘a little song,’ an apt phrase for the unadulterated lyric impulse consistent with the style and concern of Stern’s earlier work...his use of surfaces and unflinching use of events of his life as points of departure for his poems.” (Devaney) It seems almost as if Levine is imitating Stern stylistically, since regularity in poem length is not common to Levine at all, while at the same time being very much himself in theme and voice.

The first of these sonnet series comes at just about the middle of the book in a poem called “Dust.” In this series, Levine plays with the image of dust in different settings, from different viewpoints, starting with the romantically poetic and finishing with the biblically final meaning of dust for man:

Five long, linked stanzas each summon up a different memory of the titular word: motes in a sunbeam, a line about dust in a short story, memories of airborne dust, a finger’s crawl on a neglected houseplant and, in the end, Levine’s meditation on the dust to which he and his wife will someday return. Here at last, the elegy he’s writing becomes his own. (Kipen)

From the first section of the poem, where his wife is recalling coming home to an empty house (“The house was still, silent, holding its breath...”), Levine finishes with the otherworldly peace his wife feels at the recollection: “She gazes / into space seeing again those whirling / worlds more perfectly than the room she’s in, / her smile open, her glazed eyes radiant.” He finishes the series, again with his wife, as they are toasting each other at New Years:

Tonight my wife
holds a glass of black Catalan wine up
to the candlelight and drinks to my New Year
and I to hers, acts as good as any
to stall our time from whirling into dust.

The next series of so-called American sonnets comes immediately after “Dust,” in the next section of the book, simply titled “Naming.” The regularity of this series is even more remarkable for Levine, since here he has written twenty-five sonnets, all 15 lines long, all with the first stanza being 8 lines and the second being 7. The series starts a bit vaguely and incorporates some mythological images and characters, yet soon settles down in all-too-familiar Levine territory. The fourth sonnet in the series begins:

Over and over we live
that perfect winter of '33,
the ethereal music
of snow falling into snow
all night long. At dawn Yetta,
my doomed aunt, comes home
in a taxi, her eyes smeared,
her silk hose safe...

This seemingly beautiful scene takes place in 1933, ironically the year that Levine’s father died and also the title of the book of poems he wrote to commemorate his father’s death. The title poem of that volume, “1933,” begins: “My father entered the kingdom of roots / his head as still as stone.” (Levine, 1981, p. 64) Therefore, just the mention of the year 1933 should invoke for any student of Levine myriad images of loss, yet the sonnet in the current volume only hints at that loss. Time and again in this series there are images of similar losses, as we find in another sonnet that there is a phone call from a friend’s wife, politely hoping she is not calling too early, “and then silence/ and you know Bernard [her husband] is dead.”

The very next sonnet begins: “Each spring you come back to us / in the blossoms of the pear tree.” Is he speaking of his father? Of another whom he has lost? That is nebulous, as are so many of the sonnets in this series. Many of them seem to almost say something complete, yet don’t, are left ambiguous, half-formed, yet radiate with meaning that can be felt if not always completely verbalized. The same sonnet continues:

Again the earth drinks all that’s
left of you and asks for more.
Beginning April, I go out
to the dawn fields where last

year's yellow grass still hangs on,
and I say your names, numberless,
into the wind, and it's not enough.

This inability of language to express the inexpressible, of people's inability to give expression to what is in their hearts, seems to be a further development of these same themes which Levine explored in his previous book *The Mercy*. He had said that many of the poems he had written on that subject simply had to be left out of that book (Stephenson) and it seems to me that those same poems have found their way into this volume. Though *The Mercy* was a tribute to his mother, isn't it interesting that in this sonnet series we find one of the sonnets about his mother after her car had been repossessed?

Mother believed she was an American.
She'd survived steerage, a volcanic father,
two husbands in junk, decades
of corporate serfdom, a love affair
with a third-rate sculptor from L.A.,
the beauty of Yiddish, the lost words
rising in her heart until her heart broke.

And the very last sonnet in the series seems to be about yet another dead friend or relative come back to life in a dream to ask Levine if the wind has a name. In the confusion of the dream the friend's voice is drowned out by the operator, jet fighters taking off and finally the friend simply letting go of the receiver. We are left with this voiceless, yet indelible image:

Head whitened with snow,
Eugene lets the receiver slip from his hand.
I can see his eyelashes weighted with ice,
his brown eyes slowly closing on the image
of who I was, who I will always be.

Here we see not only the uselessness of language, but the ceaseless and often futile quest to know another, and therefore the self.

Levine ends *Breath* with "Call It Music," mentioned earlier. It is the story of Charlie Parker (Bird, of jazz fame) and his mental breakdown, and the friend, Howard McGee, another jazz

great, who cared for Charlie and survived. This is the most direct expression of the theme of “breath” in the book, again with its haunting opening: “Some days I catch a rhythm, almost a song / in my own breath.” Later, he develops the theme further:

I listen to my breath
come and go and try to catch its curious taste,
part milk, part iron, part blood, as it passes
from me into the world. This is not me,
this is automatic, this entering and exiting,
my body’s essential occupation without which
I am a thing.

Levine muses about Howard’s acceptance of his own lot and of the reality of Charlie Parker as simply:

a man, a silent note
going out forever on the breath of genius
which now I hear soaring above my own breath
as this bright morning fades into afternoon.
Music, I’ll call it music. It’s what we need
as the sun staggers behind the low gray clouds
blowing relentlessly in from that nameless ocean,
the calm and endless one I’ve still to cross.

So in the poems of *Breath*, Levine has woven the themes of loss, the breath of life that sustains through its music, the quest for self-knowledge through others, the dust of mortality—to eventually find something like acceptance. All this breathing, all this music, all this endless parading of friends and family that have passed beyond, all the putting of one’s life into poetry seem to be finally woven into something like a path leading to acceptance of one’s own mortality, to an ocean in which the dust that we are will return to just dust again.

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