



Man's Inhumanity to Man: the Agonizing Cry

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Inhumanity is the lack of compassion or consideration for others. It is a viper kind of oppression which is practiced on people through various ways. Different slices of society such as, marginalized, black people and mostly the poor people have experienced such oppression. The aim of this paper is to study some forms of inhumanity and how they are portrayed in the poetry of Philip Levine whose poems are often associated with the depiction of an entire world of man's inhumanity toward man.

Philip Levine has established himself as a blue-collar American poet of a highest caliber. He has received many awards and prizes throughout his career. He has published more than 20 volumes of verse, including *The Simple Truth* (1994), which won the Pulitzer Prize. He was a child of the great depression, born in the industrial town of Detroit in 1928 to a Russian-Jewish immigrant parents. At the age of fourteen, Levine himself had worked in a number of factories for more than a decade and held a series of industrial jobs such as working in a soap factory, lifting cases of soft drinks at a bottling plant and manning a punch press at the Chevrolets. These years were made even more difficult by several events that impressed him as a young child such as the outburst of Spanish Civil War, the growing influence of Hitler in Europe, and the suffering of neighbors that came with the economic down turn of the 1930s.

The United States before the Second World War witnessed challenges on facing critical conditions due to great depression that affected the life in the US and had a deep impact in accelerating the bad situations and events in the US. Great Depression was an economic collapse due to the bank failures and American economic policy with Europe that led to less trade between America and foreign countries. 1930s was a period of class conflict. One reason for this was the divergent responses which upper and lower class individuals had toward the crisis. When the stock market crashed, many of the richest people in America lost their money. But the upper classes still retained much of the wealth and in most cases did not suffer from unemployment. Working class people thrown out of work by depression and class conflicts became more violent and visible, especially in cases of worker strikes. Levine lived those conditions on ground and depicted the

challenges that the US faced. In the title poem, of “What Work Is,” set in 1930s Depression-hit Detroit, Levine wrote about standing in line, hoping for a day’s job:

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.
Forget you. This is about waiting,
shifting from one foot to another. (1-7)

Levine recalls his real-life experience of waiting outside two hours for a job at Ford’s Highland Park factory. He had seen a newspaper advertisement saying that the plant was hiring. Prospective laborers should show up at eight in the morning to apply. Levine sidled somewhere in the middle of the long line, but the factory did not end up taking applications until 10 a.m. In the queue, knowing that:

the sad refusal to give in to
rain, to 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. (17-22)

The poet believes that the factory deliberately made workers to wait for two hours before they took applications because it wanted to hire submissive people who could wait quietly, standing on their feet, for hours at a time.

In 1980s and 1990s working classes suffered a lot in their daily lives. They experienced a very harsh work environment and worked for long hours. Oppression was visible since they touched the bitterness of life along with isolation from the real life. These workers were from different origins; expatriates from various countries and black people. Levine portrayed the workers conditions showing how oppressed they were and he described the cruel inhuman activities that was practiced on them. These workers were industrious people who tried their best to improve their life by working at different careers and mostly dangerous ones, but unfortunately they could not live the normal life that people lived. Levine himself said in one of his essays that “when I say work I mean the sort of brute physical work that most of us try to avoid, but that those without particular gifts or training were often forced to adopt to make a living in a society as tough and competitive as ours” (68).

What Work Is a collection of poems which tell the stories of industrial workers. In the opening poem “Fear and Fame,” Levine describes the workers environment as a “kingdom of fire” and “some they drink themselves to death.” In the opening lines of this poem, Levine describes the worker as a warrior preparing himself for the battle ground:

Half an hour to dress, wide rubber hip boots,
gauntlets to the elbow, a plastic helmet
like a knight’s but with a little glass window
that kept steaming over, and a respirator
to save my smoke-stained lungs, I would descend
step by slow step into the dim world

of the pickling tank . (1-7)

Here, Levine describes the workers as wearing rubber protective gear and a respirator, descending the steps into a pickling tank to work with a cocktail of hydrochloric acid and other caustic chemicals. The man knows of the dangers of his job, but continues to go down into the tank twice a day and at lunch he sits apart from the other workers in silence. This verse demonstrates the struggle between life and death, descending and rising up. Workers were represented as creatures that suffer the bitterness of life and tediousness, and also they do not care about the lack of welcome from others since they got used to such atmosphere and take it for granted. People's struggles and frailties are especially obvious in the last stanza of the poem "Detroit Grease Shop Poem":

Under the blue
hesitant light another day
at Automotive
in the city of dreams.
We're all here to count
and be counted, Lemon,
Rosie, Eugene, Luis,
and me, too young to know
this is for keeps, pinning
on my apron, rolling up
my sleeves. (12-22)

The poem stands as a stark counterweight against the prevailing mentality that only capitalists and bosses are worthy of economic rewards, because they have made investments and taken risks. And by noting that workers are in it "for keeps," it underscores that workers also take risks, in the form of foregoing other opportunities, closing the door to what might have been for the reality of what is in front of them. Phoebe Pettingel observes this in his essay "The Politics of Philip Levine" as:

Although Levine has a better idea of where he's going than most of his contemporaries, a sense of displacement in his work sounds a continual threnody for the descents of mankind. The is particularly concerned with the class struggle and the resistance to injustice, 'A lot of the rage one encounters in contemporary poetry has to do with the political facts of our lives,' he has said But cynics who associate 'political poetry' with strident declamation or simple minded dogmatism will have to revise their thinking in the face of his humanism. (16)

Levine portrays the racial discrimination of black people and represented it in his poems that filled with despair and renouncement, especially labors who lost the hope as black within and after the great depression. For instance, "They Feed they Lion" explores the most brutal experiences in the marginal existence of the blacks who leave the rural south for factory work in the North. It insists the need of all oppressed lives to find a voice, As Jack Anderson said in his Review (1986):

In Levine's search for an authentic American Voice, we can see the influence of daily Speech as well as the echo of black speech. It's not simply Levine's empathy with the Oppressed and victimized that gives rise to a poem like '*They Feed They Lion.*' It is also his desire to unleash the full power that he sees latent in American speech, in

all of America's voices. We can hear it crashing forward in this poem, along with echoes of Whitman, Yeats, and Christopher Smart. (182)

Energy of despair rises in the poem "They Feed They Lion," ominous yet expansive, deadly, yet almost joyful. The voice of the black poor chants a language of apocalypse:

Earth is eating trees, fence posts,
gutted cars, earth is calling in her little ones,
'come home, come home!' From pig balls,
from the ferocity of pig driven to holiness,
from the furred ear and the full jowl come
The repose of the hung belly, from the purpose
They Lion grow. (8-13)

"They Lion" feeds on suffering and grows; not only human suffering, but the suffering of grass and stumps and gutted cars. This poem sustains throughout a mood of mature, tough vision, in which the suffering of the earth, the suffering of man, the anxiety of inward failure, mingle to create a strangely literal apocalypse, without chest-beating or the glamor of surreal imagery.

While living in Detroit, Levine encountered racism and anti-Semitism, and he became angry and afraid. Over the years, Levine has come to believe that nations and governments are responsible for the violent oppression that has plagued the Jews and other minority people throughout the world. The continuous element in the poet's work deriving from his Jewish heritage is his concern with tyranny and suffering, and it also helped him discover in the Jew a universal symbol of suffering, of exile. Consequently, Levine's portraits of the Jew and other underdogs share realistic as well as mythological characteristics. In his poem "Baby Villon," the narrator describes the meeting with a tiny ex-prize fighter Baby Villon, who speaks of himself as a marginal figure who survives the cruelty of world by fighting back:

He tells me in Bangkok he's robbed
Because he's white; in London because he's black;
In Barcelona, Jew; in Paris, Arab:
Everywhere and at all times, and he fights back. (1-4)

The confusion of race demonstrates the prejudice of native people, who are often resistant to foreign soldiers invading their land. Being "robbed" does not have to relate to loss of economic value, and spectators could be stripping the person of his sensitivity, his empathy, and his humanity. This tiny man of pain and courage epitomizes much of the humanity that underlies Levine's art.

Levine's childhood and adolescent experiences had a profound impact on him, to take the cause of the marginal, the unwanted, the black, the worker, the Spanish anarchist and occasionally even the Jew, which he does either in passing reference or in more extended form, as in his poems of Holocaust. His two poems on Holocaust are "The Survivor," an elegy for a cousin and "On a Drawing by Flavio," that demonstrate how powerful a few people and one idea can be. Hitler set out to destroy a race of people and was almost successful in doing so, he convinced an army to hate the same way that he hated and so the Jews during World War II were treated like animals. They were stripped of their belongings, clothes and dignity. They were tortured, murdered, and desecrated. This shows that the man's inhumanity toward man is sparked by a deep desire for self-gain. In Levine's poem based on a drawing of the rabbi of Auschwitz by Flavio

Constantini, the poet recalls the horrifying specter of suffering and death. When the poet looks at the rabbi, he sees that the rabbi's face resembles his own, as he said in the poem "On the drawing by Flavio," "has my face / that opened its eyes / so many years ago / to death." (29-32) it begins:

Above my desk
the Rabbi of Auschwitz
bows his head and prays
for us all. (1-4)

It is both personal and communal that Levine confronts the image of the rabbi in the privacy of his study and at the same time he recognizes profoundly that the image he sits before is one of a man whose concern is for all humankind.

Second World War was a war of great powers fought in various countries around the world and around 55 million died in different countries as a result of the inhuman destruction. It witnessed many brutal, savage and merciless actions since the use of the nuclear weapon was used for the first time in war, the strange thing is that those people who fought were soldiers and civilians in both casualties. Levine portrayed this massive destruction in his poem, "The Horse" written "for Lchiro Kawamoto, humanitarian, electrician, & survivor of Hiroshima":

Some fled and
Some sat down. The river burned
all that day and into the
night, the stones sighed a moment
And were still, and the shadow
of a man's hand entered
a leaf. (11-17)

This poem conveys the terror and fear of facing an unnatural death, implying that no form of violence is acceptable on the soil: not toward the soil, not toward animals, and not toward humans, and shows the vulnerability and helplessness of an individual against a power much larger than itself.

The images of agonized, wounded animals and helpless, kindly people expressing their empathy in a vacuum power (like "gills of a fish caught / above water") are juxtaposed to the unexpected assertion of fragile life (in which "mountain flowers / burst from the red clay walls") rather than denunciation, these images lead to the anti-intuitive but nevertheless fulfilling denouement: "the rage had gone out of / their bones in one mad dance". To deny that there had ever been a horse is to deny that an atrocity had ever occurred, the reaction of a defeated and traumatized nation. Specifically, this poem pulls forth associations with the fatal effects of nuclear weapons, such as the loss of life in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Levine has long been interested in Spanish anarchism and its leaders during the Spanish civil war. Many of Levine's poems are in honor of these men and women and their cause. The poem "To Cipriano, In the Wind" reveals how Levine learned about the Spanish civil war in 1941, at the age of thirteen, from the man at the neighborhood cleaners:

where did your words go
Cipriano, spoken to me 38 years
ago in the back of peerlees cleaners,
where raised on a little wooden platform. (1-4)

The speaker recalls his youth, the war that swept up his brother, his rise to political consciousness, through Cipriano's words:

I was growing. Soon I would be
your height, and you'd tell me
eye to eye, "some day the world
is ours, some day you will see." (20-23)

Perhaps this is because "the acids / of his own anger," with the enjambment giving further emphasis, act as life preserves for the soldier-neighbor who safely returned home, while the speaker's cousins did not:

soon the German rolled east
into Russia and my cousins died. I
walked alone in the warm spring winds
of evening and said, 'Dignity'. I said
your words, Cipriano, into the winds.
I said, 'Someday this will be ours.' (43-48)

The poem ends with the speaker realizing that the promise of those words is far off, and he again addresses Cipriano, asking that his presence, his fight for just cause, his dignity remains present. Often Levine's poetry expressed the heroism of defiance through his obsession with the anarchist martyrs of the Spanish Civil War.

Levine's intimate portraits of blue-collar life were grounded in personal experience and political conscience. The injustices Levine saw, and the ways that people survived their circumstances, affected his perspective and values deeply. In several of his best poems, Levine merges the spiritual faith of the Jewish people and the secular faith of the anarchists. In both systems of belief there is a prophetic rage at suffering and injustice and affirmation of human freedom and Oneness.

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