

Despondency and Dormancy: The Stifled Voice in the Select Poems of Philip Levine

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Abstract

Man is a social animal and not a machine who can lead a lonely life in the midst of a madding crowd. One of the basic needs of man is the urge to communicate. This is true not only in the case of man but almost every living creature. This urge is so innate, and this need to communicate is the very foundation for a healthy bond and thereby a healthier life. Any barrier to healthy communication will naturally result in a sort of despondency in the persona of any individual. The industrial world only provides barriers to the people in all their life. Failing to communicate is part of what working-class people live with, part of their condition. Levine's crafted poems articulate the speechlessness of people who are ignored and unheard by their society.

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Introduction

In the world of industrialism many troubled individuals turn neurotic, unable to cope up with the terrible modes of torture. This paper deliberates how the poems of Levine portray alienated individuals who suffer from despondency and dormancy as a result of industrialism and an unjust society.

Philip Levine, the former poet laureate who received a Pulitzer Prize in 1995 for his collection “The Simple Truth,” was born in 1928 in industrial Detroit and grew up in a working-class Russian-Jewish immigrant family. His childhood was shaped by several events such as the Great Depression, the death of his father when he was five, and the Spanish Civil War. As a young man he worked at the Chevrolet Gear and Axle factory and Detroit Transmission, where he saw the injustices, and the way people survived their circumstances, and this affected him a lot.

Levine poetically expresses Marx’s ideas of “alienated labor” and “alienation” in the lives of the people occupying his verse. The idea of alienated labor arises from a disconnection between the laborer, the labor he performs, and the product he constructs in a capitalist economic system. In *Wage-Labor and Capital* Marx explains this disconnection in an example of a capitalist paying a weaver to make cloth. Marx writes:

With a part of his existing wealth, of his capital, the capitalist buys the labor ... of the weaver in exactly the same manner as, with another part of his wealth, he has bought the raw material—the yarn—and the instrument of labor—the loom. After he has made these purchases, and among them belong the labor ... necessary to the production of the cloth, *he produces only with raw materials and instruments of labor belonging to him.* For our good weaver, too, is one of the instruments of labor, and being in this respect on par with the loom, he has no more share in the product (the cloth), or in the price of the product, than the loom itself. (18-19)

As the example illustrates, the laborers have no real interest or connection to the product which they help to produce. The product belongs to the capitalist, and he has the authority to do with it as he desires.

Poems throughout Levine’s career intimate illustrations in which workers are not completely aware of their labors’ ultimate ends and are thus alienated from their products. “The Everlasting Sunday” from the 1968 collection, *Not This Pig* revolves around a situation in which it is not clear whether the worker even knows what his final product will be. The speaker describes his part in the process of

making a product:

Nine-foot lengths
of alloy tubing and between
my gloved hands
sliding, and the plop
of the cutter, and again
the tube drawing. (12-17)

The narrator is making alloy tubing and he never tells for what the tubing is intended. It could be the end product itself, or it could be part of a greater whole. The speaker never identifies the final product, suggesting that he does not certainly know what it is himself. Likewise, the narrator of “One” from *One for the Rose* (1981), describes a woman “that polishes ... chromed tubes,” (24) yet he never discloses a final destination of the shiny metal pieces. The narrator focuses on the woman and her work, but he does not mention anything about the final product to which her labor contributes. The omission subtly expresses the woman’s alienation from her product in that it implies she has no real connection to the end result of her labor.

Factory labor alienates the worker from his very self, opines Marx stating that “(it) estranges man’s own body from him” (77). One of the ways in which Levine illustrates the alienation of the worker from himself is through many physical descriptions. This technique is present in one of the earliest of Levine’s poems, “Commanding Elephants,” from *Not This Pig* (1968). After recounting the work the protagonist Lonnie performs in a factory and suggesting his thoughts as he lay in bed after working the night shift, the poem’s narrator reveals just how separated the laborer is from his own body. Ending the poem, the third-person narrator ruminates:

“Oh my body, what have you
done to me?” he never said.
His hands surprised him; smelling
of soap, they lay at his sides
as though they were listening. (28-32)

The narrator begins by stating a question that the protagonist Lonnie does not actually ask, suggesting the separation between the character and his body. The narrator recognizes and wants to convey to the audience that Lonnie’s work dissociates the laborer from his own being that he could speak to his physical body as if to another entity apart from himself. The abstract separation suggested through

the unasked question then becomes more concrete, further solidifying its exemplification of Marx's idea.

As a result of industrial labor man exists in a state of alienation from other men or the entire mankind. This particular idea grows from Marx's previous arguments that estranged labor leads a worker to be alienated from his product and from himself. Marx posits that "within the relationship of estranged labor each man views the other in accordance with the standard and the position in which he finds himself as a worker" (77).

Although Levine recognizes that "the place (the general factory setting) has a language" (28) as he does in "Coming Close" (1991), in only one of hundreds of poems, he often emphasizes his characters' difficulties of communicating with each other. This most obvious form of alienation surfaces throughout Levine's work. "Men / who couldn't talk" clean up with the narrator of "The Everlasting Sunday" (7-8) presumably at the end of the work day, a time when they might be discussing their day's labor or their after-work plans. In "Dawn, 1952" (*7 Years from Somewhere* 1979), the narrator tells "of the great forge room / where the burning metals pressed (him) / down into a silence deeper than still water" (40-2).

One added example in which Levine presents the alienation between laborers in a factory setting occurs in the poem "Drum" (*The Mercy*). Instead of explicitly telling the difficulties the workers have communicating, the speaker of "Drum" simply describes a day at work, beginning to end, for him and his co-workers. He mentions nothing about communication between the characters. There exist many examples in which Levine's narrators or characters do not or simply cannot communicate with each other. Joseph Parisi says about alienation in his review *Selected Poems* as follows:

From nine striking volumes, Levine has wisely chosen his strongest and most characteristic work, poems whose freshness of observation and immediacy of emotional impact have not diminished during the more than two decades of his career. With their grimy setting of Detroit, many of these stark lines make grim (though not preachy) statements about the cost in alienation exacted by industrial society, vividly portraying workers and other walking wounded who sometimes, somehow maintain the human spirit. (194)

Levine's presentation of alienation among industrial laborers, particularly due to their inability to communicate within an industrial setting, is not the only way that the poet illustrates the alienation that factory workers experience in relation to

other men. He also goes outside of the specific environment of the factory floor to show the alienating effects of factory work on those who perform it in relation to individuals other than themselves. He specifically portrays the alienation experienced by factory workers through his presentation of family relationships. Through such portrayals, Levine intensifies his condemnation of the entire dynamic playing itself out.

One particular poem that shows the alienation of the factory workers experience in relation to their families is, "What Work Is." Standing in line in the rain and waiting for work, the narrator addresses the reader, or perhaps himself, implying the effects industrial labor has on an individual. The speaker expresses how industrial labor separates one from his own brother. Occupying the persona of a man waiting in line for employment, Levine tells about:

Feeling the light rain falling like mist
into your hair, blurring your vision
until you think you see your own brother
ahead of you, maybe ten places.
You rub your glasses with your fingers,
and of course it's someone else's brother. (8-13)

From this account, Levine implies that industrial labor, or at least waiting for it, goes so far as to cause one to literally not even know or recognize one's own sibling. The speaker's mistake is important in that it conveys Marx's idea of alienation from yet another fellow man. It is not the worker's boss or fellow laborer that the worker is separated from, but rather his own flesh and blood, someone to whom he should have the closest of bonds. Revealing the extent of the alienation between the narrator and his brother, the speaker continues:

How long has it been since you told him
you loved him, held his wide shoulders,
opened your eyes wide and said those words,
and maybe kissed his cheek? You've never
done something so simple, so obvious (33-37)

These words certainly reveal the extent of the situation. Not only can the speaker not recognize his brother when he is at a mere footing distance from him, but he is also incapable of conveying the expression of love and familial bonding to him. This separation in regards to the familial bond is even echoed in the physical space that the two brothers apparently occupy. The narrator tells the audience that

the “you” of the poem’s brother is “not beside (him) or behind or / ahead because he’s home trying to / sleep off a miserable night shift / at Cadillac” (25-28). Just as the two siblings are separated emotionally from each other, so too are they separated physically. While one brother, the narrator, is out during the day looking for work, the other one is at home. Probably then, when the narrator is at home, his brother is at work, and the cycle continues. Consequently, the brothers are not only alienated from each other emotionally and socially, but they are also literally kept apart from each other because of their work.

Levine’s another poem “Lights, I Have Seen Before” probes social isolation and social terror with tremendous eloquence. It opens with day break and closes at dusk, and firmly locates at urban life. The children are “off somewhere,” the speaker is isolated, the television and refrigerator provide only muffled and inhumane, perhaps even deadly sounds:

I hear only
the buzz of current
in the TV
and the refrigerator
groaning against the coming
day. (3-8)

This sound makes him remember the sound of the factory, his despondency or the feeling of depression is transposed onto domestic appliances such as the fridge, seen “groaning” in response to the break of day. This poem registers the sterility of the speaker’s suburban life and his vulnerability to external forces that he seems unable to control. Only the machines can speak, and even their utterances are indecipherable (the refrigerator groans, the water pipe cries). The human himself is oppressed into silence, left longing but unable to communicate. Repetitions throughout the poem (of “wanting” and “trying”) affirm the urge to speak and frustrations of that desire:

Wanting to say
Something to someone,
Wanting to ease
Myself away from the face
that is faintly familiar. (15-19)

He wants to escape from the frustrating routine work which does not allow him to think, nor pace or control the motions of his body. He turns into robots and/or

the extension of machines. The factory strips him of his humanity. He is able to drive home “between” the “insane” houses that surrounded him, to distinguish between the material and affective conditions with his environment even if such a choice seems, at the end of the stanza seven, like a kind of “failure” that reduces him, again to silence:

Between the cry of matters
and the cry of those
Whose lives are here
What is there to choose
But failure? (37-41)

In the final quatrain, the poem shifts register, positing the battle between power mower and turf, house holder and organic environment as just one element of a larger and seemingly timeless conflict between art and nature, civilization and barbarism, as this poem shows the period of conflict and frustration. The speaker is constantly pushed around by forces and events that are far beyond his personal control and understanding. As an industrial worker he is involved in collective and comprehensive replacement of the natural world by a human-made world. Levine’s another poem “on the Edge” captures the complexity and the harsh exterior of social life of working people:

Nobody gave a damn. The gruel I ate
Kept me alive, nothing kept me warm,
But I grew up, almost to five foot ten,
And nothing in the world can change my weight. (3-6)

The speaker of this poem describes himself as the insane, alcoholic Poe of the twentieth century, always as the part of an observer who doesn’t write, and who only watches the actions of nameless people. In the last stanza he repeats a refusal of his art, though it is provided in its statement of alienation, perceptiveness, and silence with poetry of angry eloquence:

I did not write, for I am Edgar Poe
Edgar, the mad one, silly, drunk, unwise,
But Edgar waiting on the edge of laughter,
And there is nothing that he does not know
Whose page is blanker than the raining skies. (14-18)

From the world of the worker the speaker steadily states that he silently observes everything- even in a democracy he has no power to speak and all of its

citizens' voices have been neutralized. Levine senses the wholeness of human experience interlocking with, inseparable from, the physical world in which one lives. In the civilized hell, evil adopts the most varied guises. Levine describes the hopeless toil in his poems and brings out the state of dormancy.

Man is a social animal, but in the society that Levine pictures, the word "social" becomes obsolete. Man remains only an animal, struggles to survive the onslaughts of an ambitious generation. Levine portrays the breakdown of communication between individuals as the result of the absence of the all-encompassing human compassion. Levine's attempts to restore the dignity of his fellow human beings, who constitute the society, continue to find expression in almost all his poems.

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