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“OUT OF THE ACIDS OF RAGE”: PHILIP LEVINE’S POEMS ABOUT DETROIT

Abstract

Philip Levine’s poems about Detroit are provided with a historical and literary context as the discussion centers on a short masterpiece poem “They Feed They Lion”, and around the consistency of vision discernable in poems written from the 1960s until the present. The anger of the poetry can be linked to prophetic examples of testimony and exhortation from the Old Testament. Levine’s poetic affirmations concerning the city of Detroit also confirm his political commitment.

Key words: Detroit, Philip Levine’s poetry, historical and literary context

Detroit’s “horizon of factories and its masses of industrial laborers became icons of modernity” during the first half of the twentieth century, wrote historian Thomas Sugrue (Sugrue 1996: 17). Indeed, the clichés of industry offered by Fritz Lang in *Metropolis* (1927) and Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* (1936) could both be found in Detroit. Yet, by 1967, the Riots seemed to sound the city’s last bell. No American city so desperately needed a transforming resurgence during the years that followed, as the automobile industry continued to decline. The U.S. Census from 2000 cites the percent of “Black or African American persons” living in the city of Detroit as 81.6% compared to 14.2% for the entire state of Michigan, while most of the suburbs surrounding the city are over 90% Caucasian. The percentage of people living below the poverty line in Detroit in 1999 was 26.1%, compared to 10.5% for the state of Michigan (US Census, 2008). The poverty rate in 2007 stood at 28.5%, the highest in the nation.

The scene is not brighter now: some 100,000 automobile industry workers were laid off in 2006-2007. The Democratic governor of Michigan, Jennifer Granholm, took measures at the beginning of 2008 to protect homeowners from losing their property, given that 82,000 mortgage loans across the state were in foreclosure in fall 2007 (Granholm, 2008). During 2007, Michigan had the third highest foreclosure rate in the nation. Detroit's statistics were worse: the second highest foreclosure rate among cities in the United States, with one in every 33 homes in Wayne County in default. The *Detroit Free Press* printed a 121-page pullout section listing more than 18,000 foreclosed properties. The *New York Times* noted in December 2007: "Detroit's population is now half its peak in the 1950s, and the city is as small as it was in the 1920s, before the auto industry boom that made Detroit an industrial powerhouse and one of the nation's largest cities (Maynard and Bunkley 2007)". Unemployment rates rose throughout Michigan in 2009, and the official unemployment rate in Detroit in January 2010 was at just over 15,5% - and the actual rate is higher. The city's residents are very concerned, and on March 27, 2010, there was a Town Hall Meeting to address the current unemployment crisis.

In the midst of the current economic gloom, it should be remembered that Detroit has a creative resilience. Resurgences within the city have often been of the artistic and cultural sort: in 1931, during the Great Depression, William Valentiner, director of the Detroit Art Institute, commissioned Diego Rivera's mural sequence "Detroit Industry", depicting the Ford Rouge assembly line, with money donated by Edsel B. Ford (Downs 1999: 27-28). In 1959, Berry Gordy opened a small recording studio on West Grand Boulevard. Motown Records recorded talented African American vocalists from 1959 to 1972, including *The Contours*, *The Four Tops*, *Marvin Gaye*, *The Jackson 5*, *Diana Ross & the Supremes*, *The Temptations*, and *Stevie Wonder*. In 1965, Broadside Press was founded by Dudley Randall. Detroit has been a creative center within the genre of Rap music, as popularized for the white mainstream by Eminem in the movie *8 Mile* (2002, directed by Curtis Hanson). In October 2006, The Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit opened its doors, at 4454 Woodward Avenue, in a former automobile dealership (MOCADÉ, 2008). Even the crumbling architecture has its devotees, with internet sites such as *BuildingsOfDetroit.com* (created 2004).

Detroit has produced a number of poets and writers, though most of them tend to emigrate from the city (see websites by Rashid and Klug). The following are associated with Detroit whether or not they were born there: Edgar Guest (1891-1959), Robert Hayden (1913-1980), Dudley Randall (1914-2000), Naoimi Long Madgett (1923-), Marge Piercy (1936-), Lawrence Joseph (1948-), Carolyn Forché (1950-), and Jeffrey Eugenides (1960-). Other writers who spent only a few years in Detroit, (often teaching at Wayne State University, such as John Berryman), have written powerfully about the place. One thinks of the portrayals of the 1967 race riots by Joyce Carole Oates in *Them* (1969) and by Gwendolyn Brooks in *Riot* (1969). Even a poet such as Mark Jarman (1952-) pays homage to Motown, by contrasting it to the lifestyles of "tanned white boys" surfing in California in a poem entitled "The Supremes":

The parade m.c. talks up their hits
And their new houses outside of Detroit
(...)
I saw Diana Ross in her first film
(...)
She must remember that summer
Somewhat differently. And so must the two
Who sang with her in long matching gowns,
Standing a step back on her left and right... (Jarman 1985)

Detroit native Anthony Butts (1969-) speaks of the "lives spent in the in-between, // multitudes of coexisting in this particular filament / as if no other were possible..." in a poem about Detroit called "Ars Poetica (Butts, 2003: 4)". Such is the context of creativity for the city of Detroit that also fostered the literary talent of Philip Levine

* * *

Philip Levine, born in 1928, has been classified as "the authentic voice of America's urban poor". He was educated in the Detroit public schools during the anti-Semitic Father Coughlin era, and began fielding verbal attacks against his Jewish identity when he was five (Levine 2002: 3, 19)¹.

¹ Father Charles E. Coughlin (1891-1979), priest at the Shrine of the Little Flower in the Detroit suburb Royal Oak, broadcast his homilies during the 1930s through NBC to millions of listeners every week. Levine noted in an interview:

As he said elsewhere, the experience of anti-Semitism and growing up in the 1930s gave him “a very heightened sense of what fascism meant (Levine 1981: 92)”. Lying about his age during World War II, he began working when he was 14, as he told Studs Terkel in a 1977 interview:

They were dying to find people to work, and I worked at an incredible variety of dumb jobs. I worked in an ice factory, I worked in a bottling corporation, I worked on the railroad, I worked for Railway Express, I worked for Cadillac, for Chevrolet Gear and Axle, Wyandotte chemical, just a tremendous variety of dumb jobs (Levine 1981: 63-4).

Levine attended Wayne University in Detroit, with the intent of becoming an engineer until he broke his right wrist in a fall, which kept him from successfully completing a class in mechanical drawing (Levine 2002: 13). Some of the roots to Levine’s poems of anger can be found in Dylan Thomas, whom he admired early on “for his outrageous behavior and for his brilliant unwillingness to bow down to any authority (Levine 2001: 281)”. Levine had read all of Dylan Thomas’s published poems by the time he was invited to read his work at Wayne in 1948, and he found elements of anger and resistance:

I might have inferred from the poems not only his refusal to mourn the death of a child by fire in wartime London but also his refusal to participate in any form in that war, the war we have come to regard as “The Good War (Levine, 2001: 281)”.

During the Korean War (1950-53), Levine refused to serve, was labeled “psychotic” and then released, as a way of avoiding trouble or publicity (Levine 1981: 94). In 1953-1954 he studied at the University of Iowa under Robert Lowell and John Berryman.

Levine’s poetry, spanning as it does over a wide range of subjects, includes poems about Detroit, California, and the Spanish Civil War, and could be described through his own baseball metaphor as “a two-night double header” to quote from his poem “Silent in America” (*Not This Pig*,

...I saw the threat reaching right into my house and snuffing me out if something wasn’t done to stop the advance of fascism. And Detroit was an extraordinarily anti-Semitic city. I don’t know if you’re aware of a man named Father Coughlin, who was on the radio every Sunday from Royal Oak, which is a suburb of Detroit. He had a huge church out there and he preached Hitler every Sunday (Levine, 1981, *Don’t Ask*, 92-93.).

1968). In the introduction to the collection of interviews entitled *So Ask* (2002), Levine noted that his younger self held to "belief in the anarchism of the early Christians, of William Blake, and especially of the Spaniards who in order to build a truly humane society struggled against the tyranny of church, army, and state until their movement was crushed by Franco's repressive forces (Levine 2002: vii)". The poem "To Cipriano, In the Wind" (*One For the Rose*, 1981) 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 Peerless Cleaners,
where raised on a little wooden platform
you bowed to the hissing press
and under the glaring bulb the scars
across your shoulders—"a gift
of my country"—gleamed like old wood.
"Dignidad", you said into my boy's
wide eyes, "without is no riches (Levine, 2004: 218)".

The poem is narrative in its nature, like many of Levine's poems. "I love to write little narratives", he said in a 1974 interview (Levine 1981: 63), and the "Dignidad" of Cipriano is met with the mockery of his employer: "And Ferrente, the dapper Sicilian / coatmaker, laughed. What could / a pants presser know of dignity (Levine 2004: 218)"?

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 (Levine, 2004: 218)".

Cipriano's dignity and sacrifice in the Spanish Civil War, and his hope for a better world, is linked to the sacrifices the speaker witnessed during World War II, and also with the struggles of Detroit:

That was the winter
of '41, Bataan would fall
to the Japanese and Sam Baghosian
would make the long march
with bayonet wounds in both legs,
and somehow in spite of burning acids
splashed across his chest and the acids
of his own anger rising toward his heart
he would return to us and eat
the stale bread of victory (Levine, 204: 218).

Here, in a poem with few end rhymes, the word acids coming at the ends of two successive lines stands out as a strange kind of rhyming couplet. Perhaps this is because “the acids / of his own anger”, with the enjambment giving further emphasis, act as life preservers for the soldier-neighbor who safely returned home, while the speaker’s cousins did not:

Soon the Germans 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 all be ours” (Levine, 2004: 219).

But 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 a just cause, his dignity remain present. Levine was only able to write about this particularly significant childhood experience after he turned fifty. Such a late resurgence may signal to what extent it actually affected and rooted his career choices. He chose Spanish as his first language, spent time living in Spain, and after moving away from Detroit, he eventually settled in Fresno, California. But Detroit never substantially left his work. In a 1972 interview he said:

It was very easy to go on writing about Detroit in the context of Fresno because I’m surrounded by the same kinds of contrasts, a city whose vitality depended on exploited people who live like shit while there were the suburbs of the rich who enjoyed their privileges and had absolutely fixed the situation so it could

never change. Just as the Poles and the Blacks in Detroit could never own the factories, so the Chicanos in this valley and the poor whites could never own the farms and the vineyards and distilleries; it was the same kind of gross example of American capitalism (Levine, 1981: 1-2).

Levine also compared the way well-off people in Fresno and Detroit were both preoccupied with possessions and appearances:

The rich here are so gross and stupid they don't give a shit about poetry, they just want to have more speedboats and stuff like that. It's very much like Detroit. If you're really rich you're going to buy a ballclub, you're going to own the Detroit Lions and get all those jackasses to run back and forth on your lawn (laughter) and play in your private park. Same as Fresno. If you're really rich you've got 6,000 Chicanos to work in your garden (Levine 1981: 2).

So it seems that the two locations meshed in his mind, and linked back to the Spanish Civil War, as the Cipriano poem revealed. In defense of the poor and the unjustly oppressed, be they from Detroit, Fresno, Spain or elsewhere, Levine has developed a passionate poetics of rage. In a 1974 interview, he noted that the anger in his poems is linked to politics:

...what are the sources of anger in a lot of the poems that I write and a lot of other people write? The sources of anger are frequently social, and they have to do with the fact that people's lives are frustrated, they're lied to, they're cheated, that there is no equitable handing out of the goods of this world. A lot of the rage that one encounters in contemporary poetry has to do with the political facts of our lives. So I don't see that there is any real conflict here. I think being a poet is, in a sense a political act—that is, if you're a real poet, not just a kind of court singer (Levine 1981: 13).

In Levine's Detroit poems expressing anger about poverty, racism, exploitation, human and industrial waste, there are some thematic elements that come up repeatedly in word or image, such as: alcohol (an escape, a way of drinking the anger away, as in "Sweet Will" from *Sweet Will*, 1985); rats (those hidden presences that might eat your toes while you are sleeping); oil & grease (on your hands and beneath your feet); money

(that you don't have); and fire² (referring to the fires of the foundaries and factories as in "Coming Home, Detroit, 1968", but also to the fires of the city's riots in 1943 and 1967, as well as the fires of Devil's night)³.

The title poem of his 1972 collection, *They Feed They Lion* contains several of these elements, and was, as Levine said, "a response to the insurrection of 1967" (Levine 1981: 63), the riot that lasted five days, resulting in the deaths of 43 people, 1189 injuries, and some 7000 arrests. The poem appears midway in the collection, at the end of the second of five sections, and the poems that come before, "prepare for the title poem (Schramm 1972: 23)". A closer look at "They Feed They Lion" will contribute to our understanding of Levine's poetics of rage. The poem is composed of five distinct stanzas, with the first and last playing most strongly with anaphora. The poem begins:

THEY FEED THEY LION

Out of burlap sacks, out of bearing butter,
Out of black bean and wet slate bread,
Out of the acids of rage, the candor of tar,
Out of creosote, gasoline, drive shafts, wooden dollies,
They Lion grow (Levine, 2004: 81).

In spite of the anger, the poem is lyrical, due to the refrain ending the first three stanzas, "They Lion grow", as well as the repetitions of words and phrases such as "out of", "feed" (repeated three times), "sack" (repeated twice), "from" (repeated ten times), and its rhyming "come" (repeated five times). The anaphoric "out of" beginning the first four lines gives the first stanza a beat, and the phrase is repeated some ten times in the first two stanzas. The beat is caught also through the alliterations in /b/ ("burlap", "bearing," "butter", "black bean", "bread") in the first two lines. William H. Pritchard called the voice in this poem, "incantatory, concerned with rhetorically exploiting a reader by sweeping him irresistibly along.

² fire: "Father" (*Ashes, Poems New and Old*, 1979),

³ Devil's night is the night before Halloween night in Detroit, celebrated as early as the 1930's by harmless, petty crimes which degenerated into full scale arson of abandoned buildings from the mid 1970s through the early 1990s. During the peak year, 1984, when Devil's night went on for three days from 29-31 October, 810 fires were reported (from CDC Wonder).

This is Ford or Pontiac chewing up everything, and the Earth is at it too... (Pritchard, 1972: 35)." This ravenous Lion's mouth is something to see — and it doesn't seem to be a description of the lions feeding at the Detroit Zoo, but maybe Levine had Rivera's mural in mind, where on one wall the perspective of the car traveling down the line makes the fresco look somewhat like an open mouth.

The ambiguities implicit in the word Lion are also fascinating. As Joe Jackson noted, this poem could be "a contemporary vision of the 'Second Coming'" by Yeats (Jackson, 1983: 56-8). The title and repeated phrase "They Lion" are a quotation of a co-worker of Levine's, an African American man who worked on the assembly line, and this poem seems to be multi-voiced, or perhaps the white speaker has taken on African American expression as his own. One should also bear in mind that the Detroit football team is called the Lions. But best of all is when the noun Lion becomes the verb Lying... (see Pritchard 1972: 36). "Lion" becomes "lying" most clearly in the fourth stanza, when the speaker wonders what his children will inherit.

The accumulation of objects in the first stanza is linked to work on the assembly line: burlap sacks, bearing butter, slate, candor, tar, creosote ("a clear or yellowish flammable oily liquid mixture" says Webster's), gasoline, drive shafts, wooden dollies. For Richard Schramm, this is "Whitmanesque cataloging" (Schramm 1972: 23). Levine is clearly playing with the polysemy of the word "feed" as found in Webster's: 1) the act of eating, 2) food for livestock, a mixture of preparation for feeding livestock, the amount given at each feeding, 3) material supplied as to a furnace or machine; 3b a mechanism by which the action of feeding is effected; 3c the motion or process of carrying forward the material to be operated upon (as in a machine); 3d the process of feeding a television program (as to a local station), 4) the action of passing a ball or puck to a team member who is in position to score.

This is not an obviously narrative poem, but narrative is somehow present just the same, with the white and the African-American narrative intertwined. Levine had fully absorbed a notion expressed by Langston Hughes in *Ask Your Mama* (1961): "*CULTURE, THEY SAY, IS A TWO-WAY STREET*" (Hughes, 1995: 481)." In the second stanza, the enjambment falling between: "out of bus ride, / West Virginia to Kiss My Ass" suggests something of the immigration of both white and black rural farmers from the South to Detroit, to work on the assembly line. They made the choice

because of the promise of good pay—a subject Levine takes up again in “A Walk With Tom Jefferson” (*A Walk With Tom Jefferson*, 1988): “the \$5 day that lured/ his father from the cotton fields / and a one-room shack... (Levine 2004: 280)”. In that poem, speaker Jefferson’s family came to Detroit from Alabama: “We all come for \$5 / a day and we got this!/ His arms spread wide to/ include block after block/ of dumping grounds,...(Levine 2004: 280)”.

The third stanza’s focus seems to be on the consumer society instituted “From the ferocity of pig driven to holiness.” Fred Marchant has focused on the pig in this stanza, linking it to an earlier poem, “Animals Are Passing from Our Lives” (*Not This Pig*, 1968), in which the pig being led to market resolves “to act with more dignity than the human beings he will feed.” (Marchant 1984: 303-4). The word pig itself merits special attention, given its varying connotations, because it can refer to police officers, — or perhaps even white people at large, as in *Ask Your Mama*, where one section was entitled, “Shades of Pigmeat” (Hughes, 1995: 485). As if to suggest that the whiteness associated with the word may have been Levine’s cue, the fifth stanza speaks of “all my white sins forgiven”.

The energy exerted by the oppressed to “Rise Up” is one of the targets of the fourth stanza, where the fist may remind the reader of the Black Power movement’s logo and gesture. “From ‘Bow Down’ come ‘Rise Up’” sounds quite Biblical and may refer to Joseph’s vision, and, as Alan Helms wrote in the *Partisan Review* in 1974, “Levine’s vision carries us to the edge of apocalypse” (Helms 1974: 40). In such a way, Levine commemorates how anger and hate boiled over into the riots of 1967... “They Feed They Lion” wrote Ralph J. Mills, Jr., is “dazzling in its syntactic, linguistic, and dramatic invention, its use of idiomatic effect” (Mills 1974: 55). Indeed, the racial identity of the speaker shifts from black to white to black, or is of mixed racial composition. This is important when one considers the use of the third person plural pronoun, “They”. This word is used to speak of the other, meaning especially the group of which one is not a part. Joyce Carol Oates’s novel about the riots, *Them* (1969) chose the same pronoun to suggest radical difference. The “They” of this poem can only refer to white people, and by the last line of the poem, the Lion has transformed itself into angry African Americans, the same who find rioting the best protest. The poem ends: “They feed they Lion and he comes (Levine 2004: 81)”. Yet, this is a poem, and the “acids of rage” have a positive power, in that the consuming anger has found a positive creative energy. The play on words

makes the reading of the poem pleasurable, even as it may also stimulate a desire for social justice.

Anger continued to be a primary vector of Levine's poetry, as in the poem "Sources" (*One For The Rose*, 1981) in which the waste and craziness of American life are exposed. It begins:

Fish scales, wet newspapers, unopened cans
of syrupy peaches, smoking tires,
houses that couldn't contain
even a single family without someone
going nuts, raping his own child
or shotgunning his wife. The oily floors
of filling stations where our cars
surrendered their lives and we called
it quits, and went on foot to phone
an indifferent brother for help (Levine, 2004: 223).

Even the semantic field for rage is present here, with one definition for rage, "a fit of madness...an act of folly" corresponding to "going nuts" which also carries a heavy pun... The positive roots, sources, and heritage of the country seem to be lost. Perhaps Levine is also revealing his desire as poet to transform the waste into a source for poetry:

What do we have
today? A morning paper full of lies.
A voice out of nowhere that says, Keep
punching (Levine, 2004: 224).

As in "To Cipriano, In the Wind" the anger in "The Source" motivates a kind of resistance. This is also the case in "The Fox" where the speaker in the poem imagines that in a previous life he might have been a fox, even as he suggests his own inadaptability toward an elite that has little notion of the lives of the poor:

My anger is sudden and total,
for I am a man to whom anger
usually comes slowly, spreading
like a fever along my shoulders

and back and turning my stomach
to a stone, but this fox anger
is lyrical and complete, as I stand
in the pathway shouting and refusing
to budge, feeling the dignity
of the small creature menaced
by the many and larger (Levine 2004: 215).

Once again, the enjambment accentuates the anger, as in “this fox anger/
is lyrical and complete” and the poetic images become overwhelming as
the poem ends with the fox under pursuit:

feeling the steady measured beat
of his fox heart like a wordless
delicate song, and the quick forepaws
choosing the way unerringly
and the thick furred body following
while the tail flows upward,
too beautiful a plume for anyone
except a creature who must proclaim
not ever ever ever
to mounted ladies and their gentlemen (Levine 2004: 216).

Here the fox’s tail (with an intended pun on the word tale) and poet’s
plume are one, and somehow that “not ever ever ever” sounds like “No
Passaran.”

Yet, one way of dealing with anger is to drink it away. In “Sweet Will”
(*Sweet Will*, 1985) there is the case of the man who falls into a drunken
stupor at work. The speaker of the poem is advised: “so just let him get up
at his /own sweet will or he’ll hit you (Levine 1985: 17)”. Dutifully, the
speaker and co-workers “stepped carefully over him until / he wakened
and went back to his press (Levine 1985: 17)”. His voluntary return to
work was punctuated by a shout:

“Nigger, Kike, Hunky, River Rat”,
but he gave it a tune, an old tune,
like “America the Beautiful.” And he danced
a little two-step and smiled showing

the four stained teeth left in the front
and took another suck of cherry brandy (Levine 1985: 18).

Levine's poems do not refrain from presenting the unquenchable anger that generates violence. Auden (who had taught at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in 1941-42) wrote in the essay "The Poet & the City," collected in his 1962 volume *The Dyer's Hand*:

A revolutionary issue is one in which different groups within a society hold different views as to what is just. When this is the case, argument and compromise are out of the question; each group is bound to regard the other as wicked or mad or both. Every revolutionary issue is potentially a *casus belli*. (...) Today, there is only one genuine world-wide revolutionary issue, racial equality (Auden, 1962: 86-7).

Cipriano had spoken to young 13 year-old Levine about the Spanish Civil War in 1941, and then, Levine at 15 was to learn first-hand about local civil strife during the Detroit riot of 1943, as he described it in "New Season" (*Names of the Lost*, 1976):

(...) I start to tell him
and stop, the story of my 15th spring.
That a sailor had thrown a black baby
off the Belle Isle Bridge was
the first lie we heard, and the city
was at war for real. We would waken
the next morning to find Sherman tanks
at the curb and soldiers camped
on the lawns. Damato said he was
'goin downtown bury a hatchet
in a nigger's head.' Women
took coffee and milk to the soldiers
and it was one long block party
till the trucks and tanks loaded up
and stumbled off. No one saw
Damato for a week, and when I did
he was slow, head down, his right arm
blooming in a great white bandage (Levine, 2004: 133).

The narrator's memory in this poem drifts in and out of his present, and whether or not he should speak to his young son about these things. Meanwhile, another memory of the riot surfaces:

(...) 7 years passed
before Della Daubien told me
how three white girls from the shop
sat on her on the Woodward Streetcar
so the gangs couldn't find her
and pull her off like they did
the black janitor and beat
an eye blind. She would never
forget, she said, and her old face
glows before me in shame
and terror (Levine 2004: 133).

The poem is careful to give voice to reprehensible white hate as well as to the older African American woman who was grateful for protection from some courageous young white co-workers. It is also careful with historical and biographical precision. 1950 would be the period when Levine was working in an automobile plant, and Della Daubien might well have been one of his co-workers. There is no reason to think not, and she is mentioned as well, in a kind of resurgence, in "Naming" (*Breath*, 2004), in the same section of the poem as the jazz musicians Clifford, Max, Miles, and Lester Young. Alongside the names of jazzmen who made history, come the names of the locals of Levine's childhood and youth, the names of the ones who will be lost in history books, such as "D'Angelo & Ferente's / French Cleaners & Fine Alterations" (apparently the place where Cipriano worked) and also Della Daubien, here portrayed as singing:

Della Daubien
On the crosstown streetcar as dusk
Rises from the trees. If you go back
You'll hear her rough alto echoing
Down the bombed-out streets of heaven (Levine 2006: 54).

Is there a secret behind Levine's poetics of rage?

Asked in 1972, "What's the biggest change in your writing from your first book to *They Feed They Lion*?" Levine responded:

I want to be a poet of joy as well as suffering. If you look at *On the Edge* you find the poetry of someone on the edge, on the edge of despair, the edge of breakdown, on the edge of his culture, of his own life. (...)

"You feel the lion book is more affirmative?"

I think the title poem, "They Feed They Lion," is a celebration of anger, which I love. In the poem "Breath" I celebrate my breathing, my living...(Levine, 1981: 10-11).

"Breath" was the concluding poem of the 1972 collection *They Feed They Lion*, and the title may also have suggested the need for some fresh air for the polluted city of Detroit. Levine ended the poem this way:

I give
The world my worn-out breath
On an old tune, I give
It all I have
And take it back again (Levine 2004: 78).

Some 32 years later, a recent volume of poetry by Levine is also entitled *Breath*, and takes up the celebration of breathing and living, and naming. The "old tune" is ever present, as in the opening line of the poem "Call It Music": "Some days I catch a rhythm, almost a song in my own breath (Levine 2006: 78)". Perie Longo, reviewer of the book, noticed a similarity of that line to the Inuit root word *anerca* which means "both to breathe and to make poetry" (Longo 2008). But making poetry, performing *poiesis*, is not quite as easy as breathing, and perhaps the Inuit root is linked to other early languages, or as Geoffrey Hill wrote, "Poetry aspires / to the condition of Hebrew (Hill 2000: 10)". Consider Psalm 104 (103), especially the final section (verses 24 to the end). Here the psalmist reflected on how God created beings with a wind (the *ruah*) and how if their breath was removed they expired.

When you hide your face they vanish,
You take away their breath, they expire and return to dust.
When you send forth your spirit,
They are created,
And the face of the earth is renewed.
(...)
I will sing to the Lord all my life;
I will sing praise to God while I live.
May my song* give him pleasure, *poem⁴
As the Lord gives me delight.

(Christian Community Bible, Psalm 104 (103).29-30, 33-34)

This can be clarified by looking at the biblical words. The word “Spirit” that the psalmist used is the Hebrew *ruah*, a breeze or a wind, as well as an inhaling or exhaling breath. Theologically speaking, the word *ruah* can also be used to speak about human conscience and spirit.⁵ *The Encyclopedia of Judaism* specifies that the creative Spirit of God is manifest in humanity by visions and prophetic discourse. Sometimes this spirit of holiness, (*ruah hakodesh, ruah Elohim, or ruah Adonai*) can enable someone to accomplish a special task, such as building a sanctuary (Exodus 35:30), or writing a psalm (David). The Talmud and the Midrash acknowledge the *ruah*’s prophetic inspiration, but differ on the operative role of the *ruah* within humanity today. The Talmud suggested that the spirit of holiness withdrew from Israel after the words of the latter prophets (Haggai, Zachariah, Malachi), but the Midrash affirmed that people inspired by the *ruah* would be born in each generation.⁶

But what is the link with a poetics of rage or anger? Psalms (poems), like prophecy, have the *ruah* as a source. Prophets are those who warn us about human behavior that crosses the line. In the Old Testament they could get quite angry, becoming “filled with God’s anger (Jeremiah 6:11, 15:17)”.⁷ Philip Levine, like Geoffrey Hill, has often written from a kind

⁴ One French liturgical translation of this is: “QUE MON POEME LUI SOIT AGREABLE”

⁵ For parts of this discussion I am indebted to Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique*, Paris : Cerf, 1988, particularly articles on “Esprit” and “Colère”.

⁶ “Sainteté, Esprit de” in *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique du judaïsme*, tr. Sylvie Anne Goldberg, V. Gillet, A. Sérandour, G. Veyret, Paris: Bouquins, Cerf/Robert Laffont, 1996.

⁷ This anger was linked to God’s anger, always linked in Biblical texts with people’s unrighteous and unjust ways. So one thinks of Moses angry with the people when they

of prophetic anger. Their poetry transforms what *is* — or what *was* — into a life-giving testimony. When Levine said, "poetry comes out of a need to pay homage", (qtd. Longo 2008), he again linked himself to the prophetic tradition, that tradition of "a sad and angry consolation", as Hill termed it (Hill 1999: 82). Levine and Hill also share a deep knowledge of the link between poetry and politics, and Auden's remarks (once again from the essay "The Poet & the City") may have influenced both:

In our age, the mere making of a work of art is itself a political act. So long as artists exist, making what they please and think they ought to make, even if it is not terribly good, even if it appeals to only a handful of people, they remind the Management of something managers need to be reminded of, namely, that the managed are people with faces, not anonymous numbers, that *Homo Laborans* is also *Homo Ludens* (Auden 1989: 88)⁸.

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lacked faith (Exodus 16:20), or when they were unfaithful at Horeb (Ex 32). Elijah's anger even went so far as to kill false prophets (I Kings 18:40). Righteous anger scenes in the New Testament include Jesus driving the money-changers out of the Temple (see also Mark 3:5), and Paul at Athens (Acts 17:16).

⁸ Auden was probably referring to Johan Huizinga's 1938 study, *Homo Ludens, A Study of the Play Element of culture*. Thus humanity is defined by the qualities of *Homo Sapiens* (knowing), *homo faber* (making), *homo laborans* (working) and *homo ludens* (playing).

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„ИЗ КИСЕЛОСТИ ГНЕВА“:
ПОЕЗИЈА ФИЛИПА ЛЕВИНА О ДЕТРОИТУ

Сажетак

Ауторка овог есеја разматра песму Филипа Левина (Philip Levine) о Детроиту, дајући увид у њихову историјску и књижевну позадину, са посебним освртом на величанствену кратку песму "They Feed They Lion," ("Хране се, лавовски"), и анали-

зира је у оквиру визије света коју Левин представља у свом опусу од 1960. године до данас. У склопу анализе ауторка наговештава интертекстуалне везе са пророчким казивањима у старозаветним текстовима. Простор интертекстуалног међудејства ауторка проналази у доминантном осећању гнева који избија из сваког Левиновог стиха. Левинов гнев, као и поетска приврженост Детроиту могли би, с друге стране, представљати поетски одјек његових политичких уверења.

Кључне речи: Детроит, поезија Филипа Левина, гнев, историјски и књижевни контекст, политичка уверења