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THEY KNOW "WHAT WORK IS":

WORKING CLASS INDIVIDUALS IN THE POETRY OF PHILIP LEVINE

by

JEFFREY EDMOND RUMIANO

Under the Direction of Dr. Pearl McHaney

ABSTRACT

For more than fifty years, Philip Levine has successfully written verse and prose on a number of subjects and themes including the complexities of familial relationships, the anarchists of the Spanish Civil War, the importance and effects of memory in life, race relations in the United States, the poet's Jewish identity, and the very struggles that writing meaningful poetry involves. A cursory look at the scholarship on Levine's poetry reveals that these are the topics frequently discussed and analyzed. However, as anyone can recognize in the criticism on Levine's verse, Levine's reputation does not rest so much on his attention to these themes and topics as it does on his presentation of and sympathies with individuals working in the context of modern industrial society. This dissertation identifies and analyzes Levine's presentations of work and working-class individuals. Starting with the argument that more scholarship needs to be performed on Levine's poetry than what currently exists, the dissertation's first part points to Levine's reputation in and contributions to American poetry. Proceeding to undertake the further study called for in part one, the second part of the dissertation identifies representative examples of working-class elements within Levine's poetry and places them within historical context as far

as poetry is concerned in general. Part three specifically looks at the ways in which Levine's poetry expresses and relates to Marx's idea that all of history revolves around the concept of class struggle. The final section of the dissertation explores how Levine's poetry represents Marx's theory of alienation among the working-class, identifying and analyzing key examples from throughout the poet's oeuvre.

INDEX WORDS: Working-Class, Work, Labor, Proletariat, Philip Levine, Marx, Marxism, Industrialism, American Poetry, American Verse, Factory, Alienation, Class, Estrangement, Family

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Ph.D.

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2007

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2007

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College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
December 2007

DEDICATION

Plain and simple, this dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandparents:

Philomena Ross Handzel

Louis Joseph Handzel

Mary Rumiano

and

Adolph Rumiano

If anybody knew “What Work Is,” they did. Their work allows me the privilege to do this.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without meaning to sound cliché or trite, I have to say that the work that follows has been some time in the making – actually quite some time. With that said, I also have to say that as long as it has taken to write "my dissertation," I would not be finished without the help of many people. Such people, I honestly believe, cover quite a range of folks, including the doctor who delivered me, my elementary school librarian Ms. Brown (who aided me in finding books at an early age), two of my high school teachers Ralph Voris and Mary Shelfer (who encouraged and solidified my love of reading during some of my most formative years), my best friend's mother Shirley McColl (without whom I never would have had anyone outside of school to discuss books with for the first sixteen or seventeen years of my life), my cousin Laurie Chenez (who unknowingly fostered some of my earliest attempts at writing my own poetry by acting as a source of inspiration), my sixth-grade basketball coach Greg Jesky (who, to this day, maintains that I am his favorite writer and who continually encourages me with such devotion as seemingly simple as it may be), and many other people (from the taxi driver who drove me to the hotel where I delivered one of my first academic papers in Virginia to the cashier at the grocery store who rang up my food to eat tonight). You probably get the idea of where I am going with this: this work, though written by me, is the result of every interaction I have had with another person.

Obviously, however, some people have had a greater impact than others, and I would like to formally acknowledge those people to whom I am particularly thankful. Thank you: Ron and Dorothy Schafer, for giving me my first real book of poetry (a David Bottoms book no less) and thus encouraging me to study what I enjoy; Mike Newton, for giving me my first laptop, on which I wrote the first three chapters of this dissertation; Gary Shapiro, for working the specifics out so that I could interview Philip Levine at the National Arts Club in New York City; Reiner

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encouragement, support, and most of all, love, this never could have been finished. Thoughts of a new life with her as my wife were all the motivation I needed “to be done with it.”

Finally, I want to bring up my mother, Cynthia Louis Rumiano, and my father, Edmond Felix Rumiano. I cannot thank them or express feelings of gratitude, for nothing would ever suffice. What I am is because of them. All that I do that is good and right is a result of their “work.” The Ph.D. I earn with this dissertation is as much theirs as it is mine. Mom, Dad, we did it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION		iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		v
CHAPTER		
1	INTRODUCTION: (WORKING CLASS) AND LABOR IN THE POETRY OF PHILIP LEVINE	1
2	SO FAR, SO GOOD? THE NEED FOR MORE WORK ON LEVINE'S WORK ABOUT WORK	8
	Reputation	9
	Positions and Posts Held	12
	Influence	14
	The Poems	24
	The Debate	27
	The Present State of Levine Scholarship	32
	Conclusion	35
3	WORK AND PEOPLE WORKING IN LEVINE'S POETRY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT	37
	Levine's Poetry and Ancient Poetry	39
	Levine's Poetry and English and American Poetry	45
	Levine's Poetry and the Industrial Revolution	57
	Conclusion	65
4	PHILIP LEVINE'S PRESENTATION OF CLASS STRUGGLE: A MARXIST READING OF HIS POETRY IN PART	70

5 LEVINE'S PORTRAYAL OF MAN, LABOR, AND ALIENATION 106

Alienation from Self 119

Alienation from Man/Others 123

Conclusion 153

6 CONCLUSIONS 154

WORKS CITED 160

APPENDICES

A ANTHOLOGIES IN WHICH LEVINE'S POEMS APPEAR 178

B INTERVIEW WITH PHILIP LEVINE 183

Introduction

(Working Class) and Labor in the Poetry of Philip Levine

For more than fifty years, Philip Levine has successfully written verse and prose on a number of subjects and themes including the complexities of familial relationships, the anarchists of the Spanish Civil War, the importance and effects of memory in life, race relations in the United States, the poet's Jewish identity, and the very struggles that writing meaningful poetry involves. A cursory look at the scholarship on Levine's poetry reveals that these are the topics frequently discussed and analyzed. Essays including Edward Hirsch's "The Visionary Poetics of Philip Levine and Charles Wright," David St. John's "Where Angels Come Toward Us: the Poetry of Philip Levine," and Kevin Stein's "Why 'Nothing is Past': Philip Levine's 'Conversation' with History" cover many of the above subjects in their attempts to reach an understanding of the writer's poetics. However, as anyone can recognize in the criticism on Levine's verse, Levine's reputation does not rest so much on his attention to these themes and topics as it does on his presentation of and sympathies with individuals working in the context of modern industrial society.

As Levine skillfully explores these topics, he also conspicuously presents a voice emanating from the working-class of society that speaks to, for, and/or about isolated laboring individuals of the modern world. Consequently much of the existing critical attention afforded Levine's poetry focuses on, or at least mentions at some point, his use of characters, situations, settings, and themes related to ideas of labor and/or work in the post-World War II era. More specifically, what many scholars and reviewers emphasize is the poet's literary exploration of industrialism and the exploited laborers within the system. This element within Levine's poetry is evident in even the most general assessments, and the most basic scholarship clearly makes

this point. For instance, the first sentence (and the first paragraph as a whole) of the poet's entry in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography* reveals that "Levine met his enemy in the gray arenas of industrialism," and he, "more than most poets, brings [that meeting] to life" (Taylor, Joan 10). James D. Hart's two-sentence entry for Levine in the sixth edition of *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* (1995) positions the poet's sensibilities more succinctly, stating that his "volumes of verse [. . .] show an antipathy to the stylish wealthy class and a sympathy for the oppressed working class of the U.S." (370).

Knowing the importance of industrial work in Levine's sensibility, one must look to the poet's representations of labor and the working class to reach a complete understanding of his achievement and poetics. To this end, the verse that Levine has collected in seventeen books and published in various periodicals to date supplies a plethora of avenues for study and discussion. From "An Abandoned Factory, Detroit" in his first collection *On the Edge* (1963) to some of Levine's most recently published verse, poems employing aspects of industrialism and other elements of work intermittently appear throughout Levine's canon. The author even builds whole sections of books, like those in *They Feed They Lion* (1972), and entire collections, like *What Work Is* (1991), around the themes of work and class.

Poetry is not the only genre in which Levine explores the topics of industrialism and class, for much of his non-fiction prose covers similar ground. "The Poet in New York in Detroit," "Class with No Class," and other essays from Levine's collection of autobiographical writing *The Bread of Time* (1994) directly express some of the author's beliefs about factory labor and class distinctions. Other essays such as "Entering Poetry" from the same volume and "Craft Non-Lecture" from *So Ask* (2002) create a fuller picture of Levine's thoughts by providing further details. When one adds to the poems and essays the many published interviews

of Levine, one sees the significance that industrial labor and class issues occupy within the framework of the poet's collective output.[1]

With all of the primary material from Levine that exists, one would think that much has already been written on the poet's use and exploration of labor and class. Such a thought is misguided at best. Anyone thoroughly studying the matter quickly finds that some very crucial obstacles present themselves. One problem is that the critical examination concentrating solely on Levine's poetry is fairly limited. A brief look at the standard sources for essay citations turns up, at most, thirty to forty entries (excluding reviews of the author's individual volumes of verse). The bulk of these writings appears in literary periodicals, with only eleven or so published as dissertations or book chapters. *On the Poetry of Philip Levine: Stranger to Nothing* (1991), a collection of eight previously published essays and fifty-nine reviews edited by Christopher Buckley, is the only monograph solely dedicated to Levine's life and work.

Another problem in studying the poet's writing is that all of the scholarly analyses done thus far touch only the surface of the working class and labor. Although collectively the existing articles deal with numerous aspects of Levine and multiple facets of his writing, none delves deeply or at a sustained level into the element of industrialism and the role that it plays when viewed against and in context with Levine's verse. Even those attempting to deal with the subject do so in a relatively cursory fashion, touching on points of interest here and there and/or dealing with this poem or that poem. Such analyses also tend to repeat one another. Consequently, a scholar seeking elucidation of the topic frequently encounters the same ideas and information over and over.

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[1] See Philip Levine, *Don't Ask* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981) and Philip Levine, *So Ask*: *Essays, Conversations, and Interviews* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).
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Such gaps in the criticism of Levine's poetry suggest a starting point for what should be done as further study of the Levine's verse. The scholarly community needs a more complete examination and a greater contextual explanation of the poet's treatment and use of industrial labor and class distinction to provide a firm foundation for understanding Levine and his poetry. Concentrating on the poet's sustained tendency to advocate for and to champion contemporary, industrialist, working-class individuals, I provide here an in-depth investigation of Levine's verse.

In all, this dissertation consists of four chapters. The first introduces Philip Levine and his poetry and establishes his reputation and an assessment of his place within twentieth-century poetry. Although the study mainly focuses on Levine's standing in American poetry, it also considers, by extension, the author as a member of the world community. I argue that Levine is a highly regarded poet among the public, critics, and his peers. In order to establish a debate concerning Levine's poetry, I then address key points of negative criticism aimed at the poet's verse, demonstrating that Levine's estimation within critical and academic arenas is not all positive. Finally, I present a survey of the scholarship and critical attention that Levine has received thus far, and I compare such attention to that of Galway Kinnell, a poet who has been writing comparatively as long as Levine has. I conclude chapter one arguing that Levine's poetry deserves and requires further investigation than has already been published.

Chapter two first establishes the general viewpoint that critics and scholars inevitably refer to Levine's attention to work or working-class elements in his poetry within any discussion concerning Levine's verse. The chapter proceeds under the assumption that in order to begin the further scholarship called for in chapter one, any future study must first situate Levine's verse within the poetic tradition of using work and working individuals in poetry in general. To this

end, the chapter defines “working-class” and provides a brief survey of the appearance and use of labor/work and those performing it in poetry throughout history, viewing Levine’s poetry against a tradition rooted in ancient Greece and proceeding to develop through the Medieval, Renaissance, Romantic, and Modern periods. Throughout the chapter, the study compares historical examples with examples of Levine’s verse to illustrate the kinship Levine’s poetry has with earlier poetry that either mentions the idea of work or significantly uses elements of work.

Continuing to focus on elements of work and the use of working-class themes in Levine’s poetry, chapter three argues that Levine’s verse lends itself to Marxist reading interpretations. In order to explore the argument, the chapter specifically looks at how Levine’s poetry illustrates one of the most basic tenets of Marxist theory: that class antagonisms comprise all of human history. Starting with a representative sampling of previous scholars’ positions concerning issues of class in Levine’s poetry, I argue that although studies (and reviews) before my own readily recognize and point out issues of class throughout Levine’s oeuvre, the majority do little in the way of specifics and in-depth exploration. With this investigation in the background, the chapter proceeds to look at and explain different ways in which Levine portrays class struggles in his poetry. Pointing to instances of overt reference to such a struggle as demonstrated in titles like “The Communist Party” and “Our Reds,” this section particularly dissects additional poems including “Barbie & Ken, Ken & Barbie,” “The Fox,” “A Walk with Tom Jefferson,” “What Work Is,” “Facts,” and “Dust,” revealing specific ways, both overt and subtle, that Levine incorporates the tension between classes in his poetry. In addition to containing specific interpretations of poems in which class antagonisms exist, the chapter considers possible implications and underlying meanings resulting from Levine’s use of this theme.

Chapter four continues to look at Levine's poems from a Marxist perspective. The chapter explores Levine's portrayal of estranged or alienated labor and its effects on the men and women who perform such work.[2] The chapter examines two of the main divisions of the Marxist concept of alienated labor: alienation from the individual's self and alienation from an individual's fellow men. Again, as with the previous chapter, this chapter looks at poems throughout Levine's career, exploring specific instances analytically more in-depth than has been done previously.

This dissertation also includes two appendices. One identifies Levine's poems reprinted in major anthologies. The purpose of this is twofold. First, the listing illustrates the importance of Levine's poetry in context with the literary and poetic communities at large. By no means does inclusion in an anthology automatically mean a poet's work is valuable; however, inclusion in many different collections establishes a pattern, strengthens arguments concerning value, and suggests wide appeal, repeated acceptance, and staying power. The second reason for the list is that it reveals the particular poems that anthologists and editorial boards find representative of Levine's poetry. The second appendix is a personal interview with Levine. Although particular questions and Levine's responses may not directly relate to the focus of this study as a whole, the interview provides further insight for Levine's overall process, purpose, and poetics. As is the case with any direct statements from the author concerning his/her own work, Levine's responses are invaluable to a complete and/or truthful understanding of his poetry.

Although the intent of this dissertation is to provide in-depth analysis of Levine's poetry, the study is not meant to be exhaustive. Through a close look at what many critics, scholars, and

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[2] Although some debate exists as to the exact English translation of the German word that Marx uses for "estranged" or "alienated," the two English translations will be used interchangeably for the purpose of this study. A more complete discussion for the translation from German to English can be found in the section entitled "Note on Texts and Terminology" of Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader* 2nd edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978) xxxix-xlii.

readers readily identify as the most elemental of themes existing within the author's work as a whole, it is meant to provide an invitation for additional meticulous study of the verse. Only by exploring such themes, upon which all writing by Levine arguably is built, can a full view of his poetry be established.

Chapter 2

So Far, So Good?

The Need for More Work on Levine's Work about Work

When asked during a private conversation about the placement of his writing over the past forty years within contemporary American poetry, Philip Levine answered plainly by stating, "I'm not the person to evaluate my own work," and the quickly adding, "That's up to other people" (Personal Interview). The response, as short and concise as it is, comes across as abrupt and even somewhat cold, as if it were meant to curtail any follow-up questions on the subject. However, nothing could be farther from the truth. Levine's pointed answer actually opens the door for people to find out more about the poetry itself. Acting as a veritable springboard for the study of the poet's work, it calls for others, scholars in particular, to examine Levine's writing. Looking more closely at Levine's poetry is what this study attempts to accomplish, and in doing so, it will reach some sort of answer for the above question posed to the author.

Where does Philip Levine's poetry fit into the canon of contemporary American poetry? In order to reach a viable answer for the question, one should begin by asking another crucial question: should scholars even study Levine's poetry at all? The answer to this second question, as seemingly simple as it sounds, is just as complex as the answer to the preceding one. However, complexity is not necessarily synonymous with impossibility. By looking at various points about and directly connected to Levine's writing, one can, in fact, discover important clues, if not sound and complete answers, to both questions. One can then construct a strong argument asserting the need for more attention to Levine's work. Furthermore, by combining the argument calling for additional study of Levine's poetry with a close analysis of the poetry itself,

one can reach an informed conclusion as to the significance of Levine's poetry within twentieth-century American verse.

Scholars could start answering the question as to why Levine and his verse should be studied in any number of ways. They could point to the poet's reputation among his peers and critics. They could look to Levine's general advocacy of poetry and novice writers throughout his years as a teacher. They could also find answers by directly analyzing Levine's poems. Although not limitless, the answers are multiple. After all is said and done, however, one would realize that all of the above avenues, and any like them, would be only incomplete parts of an unrealized whole. Alone, any of these directions would provide important insight into the topic, but only when they are taken together is it possible to answer the question in full. For this reason, in order to discover why Levine and his poetry should be studied, scholars must clearly identify and dissect a variety of aspects concerning Levine and his writing.

Reputation

Levine has established himself as an American poet of the highest caliber. This is evident in the many awards and prizes he has received throughout his career.[3] As early as 1974, Levine garnered praise for his work when the Frank O'Hara Memorial Prize was awarded to him. Levine did not have to wait long for his next accolade. In the same year, he won a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship, which, according to the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, "[is] awarded to men and women who have already demonstrated exceptional capacity for productive scholarship or exceptional creative ability in the arts."

[3] For information concerning when Levine obtained specific awards and honors, especially early in his career, I am indebted to the "Chronology" in Christopher Buckley, *On the Poetry of Philip Levine: Stranger to Nothing* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991) 1-3. Additionally, the honors and awards in this section are by no means complete. I have merely chosen the more important accolades in order to illustrate my point.

As fruitful as the early part of the 1970s was for Levine, the latter part of the decade would prove to be even more so, for he continued to win additional high honors. In 1976, *The Names of the Lost* (1975) won the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize for the poet. Bestowed by The Academy of American Poets and *The Nation* magazine, the prize "recognizes the most outstanding book of poetry published in the United States" each year ("Lenore Marshall Prize"). Other recipients of the prize include W. S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, and two Poet Laureates of the United States, Robert Pinsky and Stanley Kunitz. Two years later (1978) the University of Chicago named Levine as the winner of the Harriet Monroe Memorial Prize. Given "to any American poet of distinction or of distinguished promise," the prize has also been received by Allen Ginsberg, Muriel Rukeyser, and Elizabeth Bishop among others ("James Dickey").

Levine found himself in good company again through the following years when he received three more prestigious awards. One, the Levinson Prize, that went to Levine in 1979 boasted such previous recipients as Theodore Roethke, e. e. cummings, Dylan Thomas, and Robert Frost since its conception in 1914. Perhaps Levine's greatest honor at the turn of the decade was winning the 1979 National Book Critics Circle Award. Since "nearly 700 active book reviewers" take part in deciding on its winner, this award indicates, or at least implies, an important fact about Levine's poetry ("Three Decades"). Instead of merely proving the poet's reputation among his peers, as important as that is, it also illustrates Levine's critical acceptance. Winning an award that has also been given to such American poets as A. R. Ammons, James Merrill, and Sharon Olds adds to the honor bestowed upon Levine.

Levine continued garnering honors throughout the next decade for his work. Immediately, in 1980, another Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship was given to Levine. Before the decade came to a close, two additional fellowships from the National Endowment for the

Arts went to Levine, in 1981 and 1987. The greatest of Levine's accolades for the period, however, had nothing to do with fellowships. *Ashes*, which had won the National Book Critics Circle Award only a year before, also garnered the National Book Award in 1980.[4] Having "acknowledge[d] the work of writers such as William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, Wallace Stevens, Rachel Carson, Ralph Ellison, W.H. Auden, Marianne Moore, and Bernard Malamud – authors who have helped shape the foundation of American literature[,]" the award has also gone to poets John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, James Dickey and others of distinction ("About Us"). Seven years later, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, one of the most lucrative awards in American poetry, was given to Levine. "Awarded annually, the $100,000 [. . .] Prize honors a living U.S. poet whose lifetime accomplishments warrant extraordinary recognition. Established in 1986 by Ruth Lilly, the Prize is one of the most prestigious awards given to American poets and is one of the largest literary honors for work in the English language" ("Foundation: Awards"). One could say that, at this point in time, the poet's years of hard work were legitimately starting to pay off.

After winning one additional award in the 1980s, the 1989 Bay Area Book Reviews Association Award, for *A Walk with Tom Jefferson*, Levine showed no signs of decline in gaining recognition for his work. Throughout the 1990s he again won major awards. In 1990, New York University named him as the winner of Elmer Holmes Bobst Award in Arts and Letters. Then, in 1991, he won his second National Book Award for *What Work Is*. The same volume also won the 1991 *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for poetry. Although winning the awards already named provides strong support for the quality of Levine's work, perhaps he received his most coveted accolade in 1995 when he won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Simple Truth*.

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[4] The National Book Awards were renamed The American Book Awards in 1980, so as some sources state, Levine won the first American Book Award for poetry in that year. However, the awards eventually went back to being called the National Book Awards in 1987. Basically, for all intent and purposes, this means that Levine won what would have been designated as the National Book Award in 1980, the fact of which is listed on the National Book Foundation's website.

Received by such literary giants as Wallace Stevens, W. H. Auden, William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, and Marianne Moore, the Pulitzer aims to honor the most "distinguished volume of original verse by an American author" for any given year (Topping). Furthermore, as Aimee Fifarek points out in *The Facts on File Companion to 20th-Century American Poetry*, "the Pulitzer remains the most prestigious American award in letters" (402). Added to the primary honor of winning the award that year is the fact that the final judges were three winners, or future winners, of the prize themselves: Louise Gluck, Mark Strand, and Charles Wright.

Levine's awards reveal some important aspects of his poetry. That he received them over a period of three decades suggests the consistency of his writing. Whereas any number of writers may win awards at the beginning of a career or, even more commonly, at the end of a distinguished one, Levine has received recognition throughout his writing life. Although he has yet to win any major prizes in his sixth decade of publishing, Levine won a 2005 Pushcart Prize for his poem, "My Brother, Antonio, the Baker," and may receive others.

Levine's accolades also demonstrate the poet's reputation among his peers, readers, and particularly, the critics. Some of the judges for Levine's honors, such as the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize and the Pulitzer Prize, are award-winning poets themselves. Still other judges are national critics like those for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Bay Area Book Reviews Association Award. Levine's recognition by his peers and his critics suggests that his poetry is judged as superior by more than a small group of specialized individuals. The honors indicate the widespread appeal as well as the high quality of the work.

Positions and Posts Held

Awards and prizes are not the only evidence of Levine's high estimation. The particular posts held by Levine demonstrate his standing as an exceptional poet. In some way, all of the

positions Levine has occupied act as a testament to his skill as a poet, for no merely competent poet could ever hold such posts. The most obvious of these is Levine's work as a professor of creative writing at universities around the country. Currently teaching poetry writing at New York University, Levine taught for more than thirty years at Fresno State University, while intermittently teaching courses at other universities including Yale, Columbia, and Princeton. Levine has also held important posts in the American poetry community. In 1984, he served as the Chair of the Literature Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts, a position he again held the following year. He is currently a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, an organization with over one hundred years of history. "The honor of election [to the Academy] is considered the highest formal recognition of artistic merit in this country" ("Academy Members"). However, Levine perhaps began to occupy his most influential, if not most honored, position in the arena of poetry in 2000 as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. To realize the significance of such a position, a person need only look at one of the Academy's main responsibilities according to its official website: "The Academy of American Poets provides the most important collection of awards for poetry in the United States" ("Academy Book Awards"). The accolades the Academy is responsible for include the Academy Fellowship, the Wallace Stevens Award, the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, the James Laughlin Award, the Walt Whitman Award, the Raiziss/de Palchi Translation Award, the Harold Morton Landon Translation Award, and "[a]nnual prizes at nearly 200 schools around the country" ("Academy Book Awards"). The specific requirements for the position are even more telling, stating that "'[the] men and women must be chosen from amongst literary persons of the highest standing. They must themselves be known for their good judgment and eminent integrity of opinion"' ("Chancellors of the Academy"). As these criteria indicate, Levine is part of a

select group of individuals. Along with bestowing the very honor of being among a group of poets that includes Rita Dove, Gary Snyder, and Robert Pinsky, the post requires the possession of knowledge on the subject complete enough to identify the best poetry being produced.

The importance of the positions occupied by Levine over the last four decades is not limited to the honor of simply holding them. As a professor of poetry for more than thirty years, Levine has had the opportunity to study the art form in a very tangible way, giving him a special viewpoint on the subject. He has been able to learn both the obvious techniques as well as the subtle nuances required for the production of poetry when witnessing his own students' struggles with their work. His experience as a teacher alone provides some basis, albeit a fairly anonymous one, for his significance to American poetry. The length of Levine's tenure as a teacher and his positions at and within some of the most prestigious institutions in the country contribute to a more complete picture of his accomplishment.

Influence

Another important aspect to consider when looking at the significance of the posts held by Levine is his effect in those positions. In a very direct way, Levine has the opportunity to guide the path of American poetry. Although some of the positions do not allow him to have as much singular influence as others, they all permit him to put forth his own ideals and opinions in some way. For instance, as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, he was part of a group of up to twenty other individuals that made decisions. Consequently, his influence, as strong as it could be, was not as primary as it would be, say, as Chair of the Literature Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts. Both positions and ones like them, however, give the poet a strong voice as to the direction of American poetry in that they allowed Levine to control crucial decisions such as who wins what awards, what programs receive support, and who

obtains funding. As a result, depending on the decisions, careers were encouraged to continue or not, initiatives were started, and programs either thrived or ceased.

The position that has afforded Levine, and continues to afford him, the most influence on the state of American poetry is the one he has held for over forty years. As a teacher (both formally and informally), he has precipitated perhaps his greatest contributions to the art form.[5] As a writer of poetry, Levine surely plays an important role in the poetic arena by publishing his work. However, one can argue that in that capacity, Levine's part is somewhat limited. As a writer, Levine can only do what the title infers, which is to write his poems. Once the poems appear in print, for the most part, except in instances of revisions for subsequent publication, he relinquishes his control over them. His part is basically done at that point, and it is then up to readers, including publishers, critics, teachers, and everyday people, to decide the fate of the poems. These non-writers dictate the reception, the attention, and the longevity of the work. It is as a teacher, then, that Levine has been, and continues to be, able to more fully influence poetry in the United States. In his classes, he decides what poets and poems to study and attend to, inferring his approval of them and ensuring their continued availability to the public at large. He also chooses who and what to criticize or to ignore. This is not to say that Levine has all encompassing power over what poets are read in the country. For sure, he merely plays a part in the greater whole, as do all other audience members. However, the role he plays as a teacher is arguably a crucial and far-reaching one. That Levine has been teaching for over four decades strengthens these claims of influence.

In addition to impacting the state of American poetry by promoting certain poets and poems in his classes, through the years Levine has had a similar effect in another more direct

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[5] I would like to thank Dr. Megan Sexton for suggesting this point and discussing it with me.

way that, although not unique to the man, is important to look at nonetheless. Like other practicing poets of his kind, Levine has taught primarily workshop classes. Usually composed of several students learning about the genre by writing and critiquing their own poetry, the classes work under the general assumption that pupils will go on to be competent and published poets themselves. Whether or not workshop classes produce successful poets has been frequently discussed, but many published poets have started with such training. Levine, himself, attended workshops with a number of individuals, including W. D. Snodgrass, Henri Coulette, William Dickey, and Donald Justice, who have also forged acclaimed careers in poetry for themselves.

The benefit that students receive from workshops, as well as from any literature course for that matter, depends on many factors, one of which is the teacher. In the essay "Mine Own John Berryman," recalling his days as a student of Robert Lowell and John Berryman, Levine demonstrates this point. After pointing to the various shortcomings of Lowell in both workshops and literature classes, he vehemently emphasizes Berryman's hold over his class. Levine states that "It would be impossible to overestimate the effect on [students] of [his] lectures," adding the following view about one particular imprint Berryman stamped upon himself and others:

> I cannot speak for the entire class, but I know that Petrie, Jane Cooper, Dana, Coulette, Justice, Snodgrass, and I were convinced that "Song of Myself" was the most powerful and visionary poetic statement ever made in this country. [Berryman's] lectures not only changed our poetry, they changed our entire vision of what it meant to write poetry in America, what it meant to be American, to be human. ("Mine Own" 29)

Through these descriptions and others like them, Levine reveals the effect that a teacher can have on a class. More than forty years after the fact, he continues to describe ideas and convictions

instilled within him that have guided him throughout his career. As a teacher, Berryman influenced Levine by fostering and guiding his writing. One could argue that Berryman affected the course of American letters not only with his own poetry, but also through his influence on Levine's work that, consequently, has gone on to stake its own claim in American poetry. In a similar fashion, Levine has guided students who have made names for themselves as poets. This is another reason that Levine should be afforded critical attention.

A look at the actual poetry of various individuals Levine taught over the years at California State University, Fresno, demonstrates the pervasiveness of his influence. In the introduction to *How Much Earth*, a collection of verse by fifty-four poets from CSU, Fresno, Mark Jarman explicitly argues this fact:

> Levine provided an example with his poetry and person which, if it did not directly influence other Fresno poets, certainly *appeared* to influence them. Why else did Larry Levis have his canny sense of class consciousness, mixed with surreal imagery, and a shrewd colloquial voice? Why else did Gary Soto present to the poetry world the clipped, free verse lyrics of a working class Hispanic who knew the earth and weather of the San Joaquin? Why else did David St. John weave together intricate narrative pivoting on conditional tenses of the imagination? All of these arresting devices and qualities, making for a poetry of explosive lyric and storytelling potential, can be traced to Philip Levine. (xix-xx)

Through his rhetorical questions, Jarman leads readers to the import of Levine's reputation. Levine transcends the confines of his own writing through his teaching of the art. As a teacher, Levine worked with a number of beginning poets who matured as writers and continued on to achieve prominence of their own in various ways. Each particular way that these students of

Levine have achieved recognition in the realm of American poetry furthers the teacher's own place and influence in American literature as a whole. Although Levine was not his students' only teacher over the years they would all be the first to identify his unique influence in their careers as writers.[6]

The particular students named by Jarman add further to Levine's legacy through their poetry in another important way: they have produced a body of work large enough to affect others in the poetry community. By no coincidence, many of Levine's former students have published multiple volumes of original writing since studying with him. For instance, Ernesto Trejo (with whom Levine later worked on Mexican poet Jaime Sabines's volume of verse *Tarumba: The Selected Poems of Jaime Sabines*) published five books of original verse before his death in 1991. Larry Levis, a student who was also a close friend of Levine's, died early in life too, but not before publishing five books of original verse. Two additional volumes of Levis's poetry appeared after his 1996 death. Levine edited one of them, *Elegy*, and another of Levine's students, David St. John, edited the other, *The Selected Levis*. St. John has poems published by *The American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, and *The New Yorker* as well as in other respected periodicals. As many as seven book-length volumes of his work have also been published. Similarly, Roberta Spear has published three books of poetry, while having individual pieces appear in some of the most prestigious outlets for the genre. Additional students of Levine, including Gary Soto, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Greg Pape, have all published several collections of poetry and prose. Such work that Levine's students have contributed to

[6] As Christopher Buckley, David Oliveira, and M. L. Williams reveal in their preface to *How Much Earth*, many individuals were responsible for teaching some of the students mentioned: "In 1958 Philip Levine came to Fresno to teach at Fresno State College. One of the most important regional movements in contemporary American poetry begins with this single event. In 1962, Levine coaxed his friend Peter Everwine to the Fresno State faculty. Under the influence of these two gifted teachers and that of the small cadre of distinguished poet-teachers who joined them—Charles Hanzlicek, Robert Mezey, Corrinne Hales, Juan Felipe Herrar among them—an impressive and steady outpouring of talented poets has emerged from California's seemingly deprived and inhospitable heartland" (xv).

American poetry is important. Acting as a substantial testament to Levine's influence on his students, it also provides a sizable contribution to the literary tradition of the United States.

While many poets publish work that remains unknown, unread, or even totally forgotten, Levine's former students have also distinguished themselves through the recognition they have received for their work. The funding they have obtained is perhaps just as impressive as the amount of work they have produced. As was the case with their mentor, the Guggenheim Foundation has awarded fellowships to a number of Levine's former students including Levis, St. John, Soto, and Spear. Each of these poets has also received additional support for his/her work. Levis received a Fulbright Fellowship. The Ingram Merrill Foundation has also funded the work of St. John and Spear. St. John has additionally received a prix de Rome Fellowship, and the National Endowment for the Humanities has given added support to Spear. Others, such as Soto, Pape, Inada, and Levis, again, have gained funding from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Recognition for individual works is an honor many of Levine's former students have also received. An Edwin Ford Piper Prize recipient for *Sunflower Facing the Sun*, Pape also counts a Pushcart Prize among his many accolades. Although he did not win, St. John has been considered for such major awards as a National Book Award for *Study for the World's Body: New & Selected Poems* and a *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for *The Red Leaves of Night*. *Taking to Water* secured a PEN Literary Award for Spear. The American Book Award went to Inada for *Legends from Camp: Poems*. Gary Soto also garnered an American Book Award, albeit for his children's book *Living Up the Street: Narrative Recollections*. Other honors that Soto has won include the 1984 Levinson Award and the 1977 Bess Hokin Prize. In 1976, Larry Levis received the Lamont Poetry Award, an honor bestowed by The Academy of American

Poets, for *The Afterlife*. Finally, similar to Soto, Victor Martinez won a 1996 National Book Award for his children's book *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*.

Like their mentor, a number of Levine's students have taught at schools across the country. Now a University of Southern California faculty member, St. John can also boast The Johns Hopkins University as an employer. Before his 1991 death, Trejo was a member of the California State University, Fresno, and Fresno City College faculties. Levis worked at three colleges before his unexpected death: University of Utah, University of Missouri, and Virginia Commonwealth University. At the writing of this study, Pape teaches at the University of Montana. Soto once taught at the University of California, Berkeley. Southern Oregon University is where Inada held a faculty position, but he has also spent time teaching at the university level in New Hampshire. Although not particularly named here, many other poets that Levine has taught over the years have gone on to work as teachers. That many of Levine's former students have worked in such a capacity is surely an important part of the teacher's legacy within American poetry. Just as Levine carries Berryman's influence within him, integrating it, consciously or not, in his own career as a poet and a teacher, so too do Levine's students carry his influence within them.

Established writers whom Levine has not taught directly also freely admit that they have been influenced by Levine. For instance at a 2003 seventy-fifth birthday "party" for Levine hosted by Vanderbilt University, several of the poet's peers and associates gathered to discuss and celebrate him and his work. During the two-day event, individuals including Peter Everwine, C. G. Hanzlechek, Christopher Buckley, Paul Mariani, Mark Jarman, Edward Hirsch, Kate Daniels, Gerald Stern, and Galway Kinnell revealed the various ways in which Levine influenced them in their own careers and what his work particularly meant to them. They often

related how the poet inspired, mentored, or simply supported them in their endeavors. One of the most telling stories came from Kinnell, a Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner, when he explained that Levine was someone he has consulted with about his own poems. Although he did not give any specifics about particular pieces, Kinnell did reveal the crucial point that Levine does, in fact, affect the writings of others. In this instance, Kinnell suggests that Levine has played a direct role, however small it may be, in the actual composition of his own poetry.

Other demonstrable evidence of Levine's influence on the work of his peers exists, most notably in some of Levine's peer's poems themselves. With the dedication "For Phil Levine" placed directly under the title, Gerald Stern's "Leaving Another Kingdom" firmly establishes a connection between the two poets. In addition to suggesting that the entire poem is inspired by Levine, the wording of the dedication, with its use of the shortened first name (Phil instead of the more proper Philip), implies a familiarity between the two writers. The text of the poem makes an array of specific, subtle references that illustrate Levine's influence on Stern. Alluding to Levine's ability to affect his mood, Stern writes,

> I think this year I'll wait for the white lilacs
>
> Before I get too sad.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Levine will be here by then,
>
> waving fountain pens, carrying rolled-up posters
>
> of Ike Williams and King Levinsky.
>
> He will be reaching into his breast pocket
>
> for maps of grim Toledo

showing the downtown grilles and the bus stations. (1-2, 5-10)

Depicting his friend as a welcome respite from or antidote to the sadness he is experiencing, Stern does not explicitly state Levine's influence on him. Instead, he infers it by contrasting Levine's histrionics and liveliness with his own dark mood. With his arrival, Levine affects Stern in a very concrete way, bringing with him a blooming of life and action similar to the "white lilacs" of the poem's first line. Here, as in the rest of the poem in which the two men "walk the mile to [the speaker's (presumably Stern)] graveyard / without one word of regret, / two rich poets / going over the past a little, / changing a thing or two, / making a few connections [. . .]" (16-21), Stern integrates his real-life relationship with Levine as not only the impetus of the piece, but also as its subject.

The poem "Crowns" by Kate Daniels demonstrates Levine's influence on his peers even more so than does Stern's piece. Like Stern does with "Leaving Another Kingdom," Daniels dedicates her poem to Levine, suggesting again, from the very start, Levine's role in the composition of the poem. With the more formal wording "For Philip Levine," Daniels designates Levine as her inspiration from a more formal standpoint. The poem's text clearly states exactly how Levine has affected Daniels, who is presumably the speaker. Equating the embarrassment and disdain she felt for her once-crooked teeth and what they represented with the way she once viewed the lower-class origins of her family, Daniels credits Levine's poetry with giving her nothing short of dignity and fortitude.

I can face those images now without the shame
I carried in the days before the poetry of Philip Levine
liberated me. I can look at anything now, because I keep
his picture in my mind and his poems in my pocket.

> I can stand my life because I wear the crown he constructed
> for people like me—grocery checkers, lube jobbers, truck drivers,
> waitresses—all of us crowned with the junkyard diadems
> of shattered windshields and rusty chains, old pots
> with spit tobacco congealing inside, torn screen doors
> and gravestones in the front yard, just five short steps from life to death . . . (53-62)

Using working class imagery, a defining trait of Levine's own poetry, Daniels particularly implies that Levine, in a very real way, made her the poet she is today.

Levine has affected other poets in similar and different ways, but to account for every example of his influence would only belabor the point. Listing and analyzing all instances is unnecessary. Additionally, doing so is not the purpose of this study. However, taken together, Kinnell's statement and the poems by Stern and Daniels establish a connecting influence from Levine to other poets, whichever roundabout way they may exist.

Kinnell, Stern, and Daniels indirectly illustrate another important point in determining Levine's standing in American poetry, for each possesses a highly reputable status, having received significant recognition. As mentioned, both a National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize have gone to Kinnell. Furthermore, like Levine, Kinnell holds a position in the Academy of American Poets as a Chancellor. Stern has also distinguished himself among his peers. In addition to winning the Ruth Lilly Prize as Levine has done, Stern also counts among his many accolades a Melville Caine Award, a Bess Hokin Award, and, most notably, a National Book Award. Finally, although she is a generation younger than Stern and Kinnell, Daniels has received a number of honors for her work that any poet would be proud to call his/her own.[7]

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[7] Included among the awards and prizes garnered by Kate Daniels are The James Dickey Poetry Prize (from *Five Points Journal*) and a Pushcart Prize.

Through the recognition that these poets, and others like them, have garnered for themselves, Levine's status in American poetry is further solidified. Levine is not influencing just any poets. Instead, he is affecting authors of the highest caliber, subtly contributing to his own reputation in each instance.

The Poems

Levine has been writing and publishing for the past forty plus years, all the while constructing a high reputation for himself. The result is seventeen published collections of original poetry containing over four hundred poems. This accounting does not include the uncollected poems that have been published in journals, magazines, and other literary outlets. Although quantity of output does not necessarily translate to quality of work, looking at the publications in which Levine's poetry has appeared provides some sense of the writer's importance to the art. Like many other poets, Levine has published his work in a variety of literary journals. Some of Levine's earliest poems and even some of his more recent ones have appeared in *Poetry*, perhaps the most important American poetry journal of the twentieth-century. Founded by Harriet Monroe in 1912 and advocated by Ezra Pound throughout its early years, the periodical has consistently published all of the most important and influential poets of the last century. In addition to Pound, whom many consider one of the founding fathers of Modernism, the journal's contributors include T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, W. S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, and Derek Walcott. Such authors are not average or common by any means, having received National Book Awards, Pulitzer Prizes, Bollingen Poetry Prizes, and even Nobel Prizes in Literature among them.

Levine has published in a variety of other important literary journals throughout the United States. *The Kenyon Review*, founded by John Crowe Ransom in 1939, has published various pieces of Levine's writing. Described as "the most honored literary review – not only in this country, but throughout the world," the journal boasts having had such luminaries as Seamus Heaney, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, and Billy Collins, a former Poet Laureate of the United States, appear in its pages ("Guide to Literary Magazines"). Another important literary journal in which Levine's poetry has been published is *The Yale Review*. Officially referred to by its current title in 1892, the publication directly descends from *The Christian Spectator*, which was started in 1819, giving it a history and tradition that dates back almost two hundred years. Having printed verse by poets such as W. H. Auden, Robert Penn Warren, and Randall Jarrell, *The Yale Review* has also published work other than poetry by such writers as H.L. Mencken, Virginia Woolf, and Leon Trotsky. This bevy of writers, poets and otherwise, has, according to some, "transformed the journal into the nation's leading university quarterly" ("*The Yale Review*: A History"). In addition to the scholarly publications mentioned above, Levine has also had his work appear in more popular, albeit highly regarded, national publications including *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Levine's poetry has also appeared in publications of international repute. Perhaps the best such example in which Levine's poetry has appeared is *The Paris Review*. "Decade after decade, the *Review* has [given exposure to] the important writers of the day" ("*The Paris Review*"). Its interview series has even been described as "'one of the single most persistent acts of cultural conservation in the history of the world.'" ("*The Paris Review*"). Having such bold statements describe just one of the places in which Levine's work has appeared makes a strong

argument for the poet's place in not only the poetry of the United States, but also his place in poetry read worldwide.

Levine's poems are also in a variety of literary anthologies.[8] The majority of the collections focus exclusively on work by American authors. A prime example, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, in its 2003 sixth edition, reprints six of Levine's poems. Such a small number may not seem like much at first, but when one considers the scope of the entire anthology as a representative sampling of all American literature since the European exploration of the continent, the selection takes on added significance. By including the poems in the volume, which is often used as a primary text in college and university literature courses, the editors explicitly situate Levine within the canon of American literature. More specifically, by grouping Levine's verse with fiction by Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Faulkner, and Toni Morrison; non-fiction by William Bradford, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs; and poetry by Anne Bradstreet, Walt Whitman, and Robert Frost among others, the editors argue in favor of the work's importance in literature as a whole. Theoretically, if Levine's poetry were not valuable, it would not appear in the anthology at all. Its very inclusion, then, helps to define its high estimation in the academic and literary communities.

Several other recent editions of anthologies present Levine's verse in their pages. Some of them, like *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (2003) and *Contemporary American Poetry* (2000), dedicate ample space to fairly recent poets from the United States. Other collections, like *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2004), expand the time period from which they draw the poets they print. Still, other volumes, such as the full and shorter fifth

[8] See Appendix A for a listing of specific poems and the anthologies in which they appear.

editions of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (2003) include verse from different time periods and various countries of origin.

As is the case with *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, inclusion in these collections provides evidence for the high reputation of Levine's poetry. If editors did not find value in the poetry, they would not reprint it. Editors such as J. D. McClatchy, A. Poulin, Jr., Dana Gioia, Nina Baym, and Richard Ellman have chosen to include Levine's poetry in their volumes. More importantly, however, Levine's appearance in this pool of anthologies comments on the verse's estimation in general. Many anthologized pieces (whether they are poems, short stories, essays, etc.) primarily appear in specialized anthologies depending on a variety of factors. Again, this is not the case with Levine's poetry. While Levine usually appears in poetry anthologies, he also appears in general literature anthologies covering all genres, as *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* and *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* make evident. Even as far as poetry anthologies are concerned, Levine's verse appears in a wide range of the collections: contemporary collections; 20th-century volumes; and multi-generation anthologies. The variety of anthologies that Levine's poems appear in makes the poet's strong reputation clearly evident.

The Debate

Working in conjunction with the evidence of Levine's reputation, his influence, and his poems is the scholarly debate over the merits and shortcomings of Levine's verse. This disagreement, in and of itself, provides the cornerstone as to why Levine's work warrants more attention than it has until now received. Those who champion Levine's poetry are many. A few examples of such advocates will hopefully establish this point. In a 1989 article entitled

"Naming the Lost: The Poetry of Philip Levine," poet and current President of the Guggenheim Foundation Edward Hirsch provides a glowing assessment of Levine's achievement:

> Philip Levine's work is still evolving, still growing and changing. And yet it has already earned a rightful place in an American Romantic lineage that includes Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, William Carlos Williams's "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower," Theodore Roethke's "North American Sequence," Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage," and Galway Kinnell's "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World." (352)

In a review for Levine's *Selected Poems*, frequent contributor to *The Georgia Review* Peter Stitt bestows an even higher honor if it is at all possible:

> Philip Levine certainly must be ranked with the finest poets America has produced. He also belongs with those who are most thoroughly American, writing in the great tradition of William Carlos Williams—eschewing opera in favor of jazz, the drawing room in favor of the kitchen, the silk-covered cushion in favor of the bus station bench. His *Selected Poems* is a monument for our age. (198)

Finally, reviewing *One for the Rose*, long-time editor of *Poetry* Joseph Parisi, a man whose opinions hold a great deal of weight on the subject, "reaffirm[s] Levine's position as one of our most vital poets" (176). Representing a far greater number of Levine's peers and critics, these three individuals make the fact that Levine's poetry is highly regarded quite clear.

As well thought of as Levine's poetry is by some individuals, others do not always see the work in a positive light. Some highly regarded critics see problems in certain aspects of Levine's verse. For instance, Marjorie Perloff takes issue with the sentimentality in selected

poems. In the book *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*, Perloff takes to task one particular piece — "To Cirpriano, in the Wind." After a brief discussion of the language that Levine employs, Perloff states her opinion:

> [The poem's characters] are true sentimental sitcom figures, even as the poet's "sensitive" memories of World War II have the inflections of a miniseries like *The Winds of War*. [. . .] As we read "To Cipriano," we can easily visualize the screen version, beginning with the shot of the teenage boy shyly chatting with the old pants presser "in the back of Peerless (get the irony?) Cleaners," and then cutting to scenes of Bataan, the allied troops liberating the Sicily Cipriano comes from, and so on. (44)

Clearly, Levine's poetry, and this poem in particular, does not appeal to Perloff. She argues for readers to see it "not as an entrance into *authenticity*, but, on the contrary, as a turn toward *artifice*, toward poetry as making or praxis rather than poetry as impassioned speech, as self-expression" (Perloff 45). In this instance, Perloff is not finding fault in Levine as a poet per se, but rather, is pointing out a discrepancy between his intention and execution. For the most part, she sees the poet's manipulation of language, particularly in regard to that describing or of everyday men, as undermining his supposed purpose of presenting reality.

Poet and critic William Logan, whose work has appeared in *The New Criterion* and *The New York Times Book Review* among other highly reputable literary outlets, apparently agrees with Perloff's thinking. In his review of Levine's 1999 collection *The Mercy*, wittily titled "No Mercy," Logan blasts Levine for reasons similar to those voiced by Perloff. Commenting on one particular piece, he laments, "Alas, Levine never seems to realize that [his phrasing] creates a world invulnerable to the malformations of emotion, so he goes on squeezing [his] poem[s] for

tears; and eventually he gets them, even if they're only his own" (63). Here, Logan specifically takes issue with what he sees as Levine's inability to convey genuine feeling to the reader. This defect, however, is not a problem that the critic recognizes in just one poem or even one book by the poet. Arguing that "For more than two decades [Levine] has labored in his mawkish wallow, ransacking his muddy version of Americana for out-of-the-mud transcendence," Logan regards this as a persistent flaw (63).

Perloff's and Logan's identifications of shortcomings in Levine's poetry should come as no real surprise. No poet pleases everyone, and it is the critic's job to point out and analyze an individual writer's successes and failures. Levine and his critics are no exception to this interplay. However, Levine's poetry is sometimes the subject of an even more thorough or over-reaching criticism than that which merely looks to the various aspects of the poet's canon as a whole. More specifically, some critics do not limit their scrutiny of Levine's verse to particular merits and/or faults. Instead, they take upon themselves the task of arguing whether Levine's work is, in fact, poetry at all.

One critic who does not see Levine's work as poetry is James Wood. Since Wood was once a senior editor for *New Republic*, a highly reputable political publication that prints poetry often, Wood's opinion would seemingly hold as much weight as that of anyone else. A 1999 discussion published in the on-line news/commentary journal *Slate* makes Wood's thoughts all too clear. Incited by poet and current Chairman for the National Endowment for the Arts Dana Gioia's criticism that "[he] can follow [Levine's] poem[s] moment by moment, but the language never draws [him] inside it" (Gioia, "The Gentle"), Wood adamantly professes his negative thoughts.

> Levine's poetry deserves no friends. For one thing, it isn't poetry. He selects a dismal memory of his early life in Detroit, stumbles across the most obvious words, and then shuffles it into broken lines. But it has no meter, no pressure, no grasp of what line-breaks exist for, and no extravagance. It's the opposite of Keats' "fine excess;" it's a blank minimum. Even as prose it would be dull. [. . .] In poem after poem, he rolls out the same muddy carpet of flat prose broken into entirely arbitrary lines and gray adjectives and adverbs. (Wood)

These words are not praise of any kind. Furthermore, this dissertation will show in later chapters, they are not necessarily accurate either.

Another scholar who is not particularly kind in her criticism of Levine's poetry is Helen Vendler. The author of several books of literary criticism and perhaps the most highly regarded living critic of poetry, Vendler clearly views Levine's work as something other than verse. In her 1988 book-length study *The Music of What Happens*, she writes, "Often Levine seems [. . .] simply a memoir-writer in prose who chops up his reminiscent paragraphs into short lines," and later she asks, "is there any compelling reason why it should be called poetry?" (385). Furthermore, as if the claim and question were not enough to make her point, Vendler continues that, at times, Levine's writing "is only a step away from Lois Wyse or Rod McKuen" (386). Intended as a cut at her subject, the association with the two writers takes on added significance in that Vendler does not designate whether Levine's writing is "a step" better or worse than theirs. However, the fact that one would be hard-pressed to find any reputable scholar or critic who defines Wyse or McKuen as poets makes Vendler's connection of Levine with the two particularly damning.

Although the views of Perloff, Wood, Logan, and Vendler do not cover all of the problems that critics see in Levine's writing, they do help to prove my point. They stand in direct opposition to the accolades and recognition Levine's work has received from other peers and critics. In doing so, they provide strong evidence that a debate over the quality and value of Levine's poetry does, in fact, exist. The views of those mentioned also contribute to the seriousness of the debate, for they do not come from marginal sources. They do not even come from average critics or peers. To the contrary, they are opinions put forth by some of the most respected individuals in the literary community. As such they should be afforded the utmost attention and consideration.

The Present State of Levine Scholarship

Critics have focused on only a few subjects concerning Levine's poems. For instance, some critics have focused on the specific Jewish characteristics within the poet's writing.[9] Levine's use of the Spanish Civil War in specific poems has been a topic of investigation.[10] Even the long poems of Levine have served as a central point of discussion.[11] There is much more in the poet's writings to merit critical research. Many of his poems concern issues surrounding the family unit; others make use of memory; and still other pieces focus on the nature of art and poetry in particular for example. Some critics have, in fact, touched on such

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[9] See Jonathan N. Barron, "New Jerusalems: Contemporary Jewish Poets and the Puritan Tradition," *The Calvinist Roots of the Modern Era*, ed. Aliki Barnstone, Michael Tomasek Manson, and Carol J. Singley (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997) 231-49; Devin Grant Harner, *Landscape and Memory in the Poetry of Philip Levine and Gary Snyder*, Diss. University of Delaware, 2007; and Richard S. Chess, *Still a Small Voice: Toward an American Jewish Poetry*, Diss. University of Florida, 1988.

[10] See Edward Hirsch, "Naming the Lost: The Poetry of Philip Levine," *On the Poetry of Philip Levine*: *Stranger to Nothing*, ed. Christopher Buckley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) 344-52; Fred Marchant, "Cipriano Mera and the Lion: A Reading of Philip Levine," *On the Poetry of Philip Levine*: *Stranger to Nothing*, ed. Christopher Buckley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) 303-10; and Robert Hedin, "In Search of a New World: The Anarchist Dream in the Poetry of Philip Levine," *On the Poetry of Philip Levine*: *Stranger to Nothing*, Ed. Christopher Buckley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) 296-302.

[11] See Richard Jackson, "The Long Embrace: Philip Levine's Longer Poems," *On the Poetry of Philip Levine*: *Stranger to Nothing*, ed. Christopher Buckley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) 324-36.

topics, but in only a cursory manner. However, they have only touched the surface of the subjects. The point of the matter is that Levine's four hundred or so poems offer a rich field for investigation, be it more extensive analyses or examinations of new subjects.

Further inquiry into Levine's writing must occur. An initial assessment of the scholarship already existing from an inventory readily accessible with the use of online databases and other computer resources demonstrates this fact. A brief look at the standard databases produces thirty to forty viable scholarly studies of Levine's work. The *Modern Language Association International Bibliography* lists sixty citations for Levine, but only just over half of these are critical articles. The remainder includes interviews with the poet, reviews of the author's individual books, or original essays by Levine. Some of the just over thirty critical essays are not exclusively dedicated to the study of Levine's work, but rather use the poet's writing to make some peripheral point on another subject. An additional fifteen citations are listed in other bibliographic sources.

Proquest Dissertations and Theses does not reveal much scholarship on Levine's work. Taking inventory of the number of dissertations relating to Levine, one finds a paltry eleven. Only nine are doctoral dissertations; seven are actual scholarly investigations that include Levine's poetry. The remaining four of the eleven cited are creative dissertations of original poetry that look to Levine's writing as a model or influence. Most importantly, though, no dissertation focuses solely on Levine and his work. Devin Grant Harner's 2007 Ph.D. dissertation entitled *Landscape and Memory in the Poetry of Philip Levine and Gary Snyder* is the closest to focusing solely on Levine throughout. However, as the title reveals, even Harner's study divides its concentration between Levine's poetry and another poet's work. Whereas a few of the remaining studies have portions of their whole dedicated to the analysis of some aspect of

Levine's writing, other ones merely use Levine and his verse as parts for a larger argument about some general topic in poetry.

On the Poetry of Philip Levine: Stranger to Nothing (1991), edited by Christopher Buckley, is the only monograph dedicated specifically and solely to Levine's life and work. However, like the bibliographic source listings and the dissertations, it too is misleading about how much it contributes to the scholarship existing on the poet. A collection of previously published essays and reviews, *On the Poetry of Philip Levine* adds nothing new to the scholarly work on Levine through its publication. On the contrary, it merely gathers what is already available.

What this simplistic "numbers" inventory of critical work on Levine's poetry reveals is that although Levine has been writing and publishing original work in the most prestigious and highly regarded outlets for over forty years, the scholarship produced on the poet averages only one critical article for every year that the poet has been writing. In and of itself the critical attention afforded Levine over his career is not necessarily problematical. However, when compared to the attention critics focus on contemporary peers of Levine, it reveals some problematical discrepancies.

One particular poet who is comparable to Levine for this purpose is Galway Kinnell. Kinnell, who is a year older than Levine, has published perhaps half as many books of original work, with his first volume appearing in 1960, only three years prior to Levine's first book, *On the Edge*, which was published in 1963. A cursory search of the *Modern Language Association Bibliography* on Kinnell yields twice as many critical articles on Kinnell than on Levine. Looking at the number of dissertations on Kinnel reiterates this point: twenty-four citations relate to Kinnell, with about seven of these focusing solely on the poet's work. Again that is a

ratio of two to one when compared to the number of dissertations on Levine, not taking into account that none of the dissertations involving him focus solely on his work. The number of books published on Kinnell tells much the same story. At least three books deal solely with Kinnell's poetry. Two of these, like the one that exists on Levine, are collections of essays. However, the third Kinnell book is a general introduction and analysis of the poet's work in the Twayne Author Series.

This comparison of Levine and Kinnell, albeit cursory, reveals a puzzling, if not important discrepancy between the amount of critical attention afforded the two poets. Many similarities and differences between the two poets and their careers make the discrepancy all the more remarkable. Both men have been writing and publishing for pretty much the same amount of time, with Kinnell pre-dating Levine by five years at most. Both have repeatedly appeared in the most prestigious publications, including *Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Paris Review*. They are both staples in various anthologies used in classrooms around the country. Each has received awards and recognition for his work. Most notably, both have received a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award, and each serve(d) as a chancellor for the Academy of American Poets. Perhaps what separates them most noticeably from each other, aside from their styles and frequent subjects, is the amount that they have published. Having put out seventeen volumes of verse as of 2005, Levine has published more than twice as much as Kinnell.

Conclusion

A fuller examination of Levine's poetry than what presently exists is needed. That such a small amount of scholarly work has been done on Levine as compared to the amount produced on one of his peers, as high above the norm as Kinnell is, provides only one bit of proof. A plethora of additional support abounds as to the validity of such a claim. Levine's poems, over

400 and counting, have appeared in most, if not all, of the preeminent literary publications in the United States and around the world, indicating strong demand for his verse. The high quality of Levine's poetry evidences itself in the various accolades Levine has received from his peers and scholars alike. Levine's work as a teacher, and therefore his influence on hundreds of students, many of whom have established their own reputations within American poetry and the poetry arena at large only intensifies the need for a closer look at his poetry. In analyzing Levine's verse, scholars will not only gain insight to the poet's work itself, but they will also be able to more fully understand the poetry of succeeding generations. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, scholars must look more closely at Levine's poetry than they have to date because an actual debate as to the value of the work presently exists between some of the most well-respected scholars themselves. Not until such a thorough evaluation of Levine and his poetry is performed will the public be able to view the poet and the work in its full light and, thus, formulate an informed opinion of them.

Chapter 3

Work and People Working in Levine's Poetry in Historical Context

Contemporary critics often label Levine a working class poet, describing his writing as working class verse. Evidence for this abounds in reviews of Levine's books and in entries on the poet in standard sources for general academic research.[12] That the poet comes from somewhat working class origins generates the associations made by critics. Although, Levine does write about a variety of topics in his verse (as a writer of any particular value surely would), secondary sources on his poetry more often than not associate Levine with working class elements. The tenacity with which Levine's elements of work are noted makes it essential to understand his place within the tradition of working class poetry. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to look at and to understand the tradition itself.

To look at the entire tradition of working class poetry is beyond the scope of this project. Rather I will highlight specific key instances of poetry from the past concerning work and laborers that are comparable to or suggestive of Levine's verse on the same subjects.[13] I will look particularly at how Levine's poetry adds to or deviates from the verse preceding it. This

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[12] For reviews containing specific references to work and laborers in Levine's poetry, which began to appear consistently after the appearance of *They Feed They Lion*, see – among others – Robert D. Spector's review of *They Feed They Lion* in the March 11, 1972, issue of *Saturday Review* (vol. 55) and the review articles "A Gathering of Poets" by Richard Schramm and "Books of Change: Recent Collections of Poems" by Joyce Carol Oates. Such references continue to this day in reviews of Levine's latest collection *Breath* (2004).

Reference sources connecting Levine's poetry to working class elements include Joan Taylor's entry on Philip Levine in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*; entries on the poet in volumes 9, 37, and 52 of *Contemporary Authors*, by Stewart R. Hakola, Tom Pendergast, and Bruce Boston, et. al. respectively; Christopher Buckley's entry on Levine in *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies*; Michael Paul Novak's entry on the poet in the *Critical Survey of Poetry*; David Perkins's *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* (pp. 509-510); and Jay Parini's *The Columbia History of American Poetry* (1993) (specifically the chapters entitled "The Postconfessional Lyric" by Gregory Orr and "The Visionary Poetics of Philip Levine and Charles Wright" by Edward Hirsch).

[13] I am indebted to *The Oxford Book of Work* edited by Keith Thomas for leading me to many of the examples of poetry other than Levine's that deal with work or laborers I cite in this chapter. Furthermore, the introduction (Thomas xii-xxiii) of the collection was invaluable in helping me create a plan of progression for the chapter, emphasizing and explaining key periods in which poetry about work has occurred in the past.

process will, in turn, provide a view of the origins of Levine's working class poetics, while showing various points where Levine's poetry falls within the working class tradition and its seeds.

The best point to start looking at Levine's place within the history of working class poetry is to define the tradition. Although one could pen an entire volume specifying what "working class" means (stipulating specifics and arguing nuances), a concise definition and a brief discussion of the term is my starting point. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "working-class" refers to "The grade or grades of society comprising those who are employed to work for wages in manual or industrial occupations" ("Working(-)Class," def. a). This is a perfect definition in relation to the poet's writing, for such laborers are characters, narrators, and reference points in many of Levine's poems. The *Oxford English Dictionary* places initial common usage of the term in the late eighteenth century, when industrialism was beginning to firmly entrench itself within the economic framework of English society. This fact fits the purpose of analyzing Levine's poetry also in that much of Levine's settings are industrial in nature.

As fitting and simple as is the above definition in regard to Levine's poetry, it is problematical for looking at the history of working class poetry as a whole. If we adhere to the strict definition, working class poetry could not have existed before the middle of the eighteenth century when a working class came into existence. However, no one will argue that work did not exist before the time period in question. Furthermore, plenty of evidence exists showing that work was sometimes the subject of poetry. It is in this obvious combining of work and poetry where, I argue, the true origins of working class poetry resides.

Levine's Poetry and Ancient Poetry

Before the appearance of a specified working class, poets referred to and used instances of work/labor in their verse. Perhaps, the most well known and earliest examples of such poetry date back to ancient times. Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*, dated around 750 BC, does not focus on work per se, but it does make use of the idea nonetheless. Primarily about the Trojan War and all it entails, the poem presents a plausible initial point of discussion concerning general themes of labor in poetry as it essentially proceeds from and revolves around the work of soldiers. The use of and references to work and labor, however, are not always as abstract as the overarching concentration on war and the labor of soldiers might suggest. Any cursory reading of the poem reveals that Homer employs concrete descriptions of work in the story for a variety of purposes.

One particular example of Homer's use of work in *The Iliad* is when he metaphorically relates an instance of how and when the Greeks overcome the Trojans in an extended simile comparing agricultural labor (or the rest and recovery from it) with the tiring work of battle:

> But at the hour
> a woodsman takes his lunch in a cool grove
> of mountain pines, when he has grown arm-weary
> chopping tall timber down, and, sick of labor,
> longs for refreshment – at that height of noon
> Danaans calling fiercely back and forth
> broke the Trojan line. (XI.95-101)

This particular reference to work, however, is only one way in which Homer makes use of the subject.

Predating by more than two millennium the industrial landscapes and environments of Levine's poems, Homer paints a picture very similar to the contemporary writer's settings in another part of his epic. In the description of where Hephaistos plies his trade, Homer creates a mythical world that could stand in for Levine's own industrial world of today:

> [. . .], returning to his bellows,
> training them on the fire, crying, "To work!"
> In crucibles the twenty bellows breathed
> every degree of firery air: to serve him
> a great blast when he labored might and main,
> or a faint puff, according to his wish
> and what the work demanded.
>
> Durable
>
> fine bronze and tin he threw into the blaze
> with silver and with honorable gold,
> then mounted a big anvil in his block
> and in his right hand took a powerful hammer,
> managing with his tongs in his left hand. (XVIII: 539-50)

In the epic, Homer's words trace Hephaistos's construction of pieces of magical armor deep within his volcano "workshop" for the mortal soldier Hector. Similarities to Levine's work are readily apparent. The armor that the god constructs is the ancient counterpart to the metal pieces Levine's characters produce in industrial America. Furthermore, with its intense heat, its smoke, and its inevitable cacophony of sounds, Hephaistos's volcano easily acts as counterpart to the factory floor presented in a number of Levine poems.

One finds specific evidence of similarities to Homer's poetry in Levine's *What Work Is*, the winner of the 1991 National Book award. Working "[i]n [a] soap factory," the speaker of the poem "Growth" experiences a setting much like that of the ancient god (Levine 1). Levine's narrator describes his labor in no uncertain terms:

> My job
> was always the racks and the ovens—
> two low ceilinged metal rooms
> the color of sick skin. When I
> slid open the heavy doors my eyes
> started open, the pores
> of my skull shrivelled, and sweat
> smelling of scared animal burst from
> me everywhere. (Levine 23-31)

Levine's setting and the product are different from those of Homer, but the heat is just as palpable. In fact, for all intent and purposes, it is worse. The ancient god is in his element, working at a noble task, as Homer indicates. Levine's narrator, on the other hand, is doing something quite different. He is essentially working in a living hell, performing what amounts to a meaningless task that, rather than sustaining or protecting life, drains and destroys it.

Homer is not the only classical author to incorporate labor and/or work within his verse. The ancient Roman poet Virgil also made use of the topic. In his epic about the founding of Rome, *The Aeneid* (ca. 19 BC), which in itself was a monumental labor, Virgil echoes his predecessor's poem. Decreeing that "Armor is to be forged for a brave soldier," Vulcan, the

Roman equivalent of Hephaistos, orders his minions, the Cyclops, to begin work on the job (Virgil VIII.592). The narrator describes their labor:

> Vulcan said no more,
> But they for their part buckled down as one,
> Alloting equal tasks to each. In streams
> The molten brass and gold flowed. Iron that kills
> Turned liquid in the enormous furnace heat.
> They shaped a vast shield, one that might alone
> Be proof against all missiles of the Latins;
> Fastened it, layer on layer, sevenfold.
> Some smiths drew pulsing in and blasted out
> The air with bellows, others plunged the metal
> Screeching in fresh water, and the cavern
> Groaned under the anvils they set down.
> Now this, now that one, for a mighty stroke
> Brought up his arms in rhythm, as they hammered,
> Shifting the metal mass with gripping tongs. (Virgil VIII.596-610)

As in the example from Homer, Virgil's description is that of work being performed. Similarly, Virgil's words could just as easily describe the type of scenes and work present within so many of Levine's own poems, yet the Roman's description goes one step further than the Greek's in regard to its similarities to Levine's poetry. Instead of only a single individual working as Hephaistos does in *The Iliad*, several underlings perform for an individual above them in *The Aeneid*, creating a situation very much like a crew working for a foreman. Consequently, Virgil's

scene more readily resembles the busy factories, with many people working together, even more so than does Homer's scene.

Levine's poetry also frequently describes people laboring together in a working environment under a superior or boss. A prime example is evident in "Detroit Grease Shop Poem" from *They Feed They Lion* (1972). The narrator of the poem makes the working dynamic clear when he states, "We're all here to count / and to be counted, Lemon, / Rosie, Eugene, Luis, / and me [. . .]" (Levine, "Detroit" 16-22). The assumption is that the workers are "to be counted" by their boss. This statement comes after the speaker directly conveys work being done. Focusing on a single laborer, he says,

> Four bright steel crosses,
> Universal joints, plucked
> Out of the burlap sack—
> "the heart of the drive train,"
> the book says. Stars
> on Lemon's wooden palm,
> stars that must be capped,
> rolled, and anointed,
> that have their orders
> and their commands as he
> has his. (Levine, "Detroit" 1-11)

"Lemon, / Rosie, Eugene, Luis, / and [the narrator]," who work for some superior who gives them "commands" and "orders" are much like the cyclops working for Vulcan. Furthermore, the universal joints that Levine's laborers are assembling parallel the shield made by the cyclops

in being the product produced. Finally, by stating that the universal joints made by Lemon and his coworkers are "anointed," Levine gives a religious, if not god-made, quality to the assembled parts.

The relationship between the laborers and the products that they make, however, provides a point of departure for Levine. He carries the relationship conveyed by Virgil a step forward. Whereas Vulcan's underlings have no specified relationship to the product they construct once they have made it, Levine instills some sense of power in his workers beyond simply being the means to the end of the assembly of the universal joints. The poem's narrator says that the joints "have their orders / and their commands as" Lemon and the others have theirs. Presumably, Levine's workers are the ones giving the orders and commands to the universal joints, most logically, by dictating the way they are assembled and sending them out into the world.

In addition to having recognizable similarities to Virgil's poetry by having a group of laborers work under a superior, Levine's poetry compares to Virgil's in another way in that he makes clear that work/labor is a central idea within his writing. This is evident, perhaps most notably, in many of Levine's titles. A few such poems are "An Abandoned Factory, Detroit," "The Wife of the Foundry Worker," "Detroit Grease Shop Poem," "When the Shift Was Over," "Saturday Sweeping," and "What Work Is." All these suggest the primacy of work or labor of some sort. Levine carries the idea of work's importance in his poetry further by entitling one of his collections *What Work Is*.

Not only does Virgil arguably present the ancient equivalent to the goings on in a modern day factory, but he also gives work particular prominence within his poetry. Composed some ten years prior to *The Aeneid*, Virgils's *Georgics* (ca. 32 BC) has the concept of work at its heart.[14]

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[14] Another viable example for this point is Hesiod's *Works and Days*. Describing the various parts of the ancient poem, the unattributed introduction to The Loeb Classical Library's edition of *Works and Days* reports that in the

Janet Lembke makes this point when she argues that "The central thesis of the *Georgics* [revolves around] labor—sheer, ceaseless hard work—[as] the only barrier between the farmer and ruin" (Introduction xvii). The poem strays from the motif at times, but its existence proceeds from the idea of work. With its focus on agriculture, *Georgics* does not immediately call to mind factory scenes; however, taken together, the poems demonstrate that the idea of work is evident in some of the earliest poetry in existence.

Levine's Poetry and English and American Poetry

In a general survey of English poetry, one can also identify themes of work and/or labor that resemble elements present within Levine's poetry. The themes certainly appear in Old English literature. Like *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*, the Old English epic *Beowulf* does not focus on work, but it does make mention of it. One particular instance exists early in the poem when Hrothgar "command[s] a hall to be built, / A huger mead-house to be made and raised / Than any ever known to the children of men" (Trapp 68-70). In order to construct the edifice, "Not few, we are told, were the tribes who then / Were summoned to the work far throughout this world / To adorn the dwelling-place" (Trapp 74-76). Here, again, one sees several workers under the direction of one individual, Hrothgar, calling to mind a factory setting, or more specifically a construction site, in which a foreman or "boss" directs others as to the work that needs to be done. The narrator's passing mention of building the hall, which is hard work, appears to place little significance on the event. However, the fact that the *Beowulf* poet mentions it at all attests to its importance. In all, the poem is more than three thousand lines long describing many subjects. The poet could just as easily have left out why or how the building is made, and the poem would be essentially the same as it is with the information. Through the inclusion of even

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opening of the poem "comes a general exhortation to industry" and that "[t]he second section shows how a man may escape want and misery by industry and care both in agriculture and in trading by sea" (Henderson xvii,xviii).

the short description, the author implicitly suggests the importance of the act. Furthermore, the building itself acts as a crucial setting and, in some ways, as the object that instigates Grendel's wrath, adding to the importance of the event.

The use of work and/or labor as a theme or topic for poetry continues into the Middle English period. William Langland incorporates work and/or labor in *The Vision of Piers Plowman* and places particular emphasis on the themes of work. He implicitly suggests the importance of work through the piece's title and that the plot revolves around the common fieldworker. Langland makes concrete use of the themes by specifically referring to them in various parts of his text. A prime example of this exists in Passus VIII. Beginning with a fellow plowman's lamentation over not having "plowed [his] half-acre and afterwards sown it" (Langland VIII.3), the section is rife with descriptions of manual and physical labor. Furthermore, as not to leave the significance of such work unaccounted for, the section ends by encouraging all workers to continue performing their labor if they do not want to fall prey to want of food.

Langland is not the only major poet of the period to write about physical work or laborers. Geoffrey Chaucer, the most well known and studied poet of the Middle English period, also turns his attention to the theme and subjects, albeit peripherally. In *The Canterbury Tales*, physical labor, for the most part, is not of primary concern to Chaucer, for he frequently mentions it only in passing for characterization or to further the action. For instance, "The Miller's Tale" consists of "a beautifully plotted tale of a dull-witted <u>carpenter</u>, his tricksy wife, and her two suitors" (Sanders 58, underline mine). The story may be about a carpenter, but for all intent and purposes, acts of working do not figure prominently in "The Miller's Tale." For that matter, acts of working do not figure prominently in "The Reeve's Tale" (another story that

supports my argument) either, for it is about a miller without focusing on the profession itself. Chaucer's seemingly cursory attention afforded acts of physical labor, however, does not mean they hold no significance within the poem. Like the *Beowulf* poet before him, Chaucer mentions physical labor and thus signals its importance. By placing it in the poem, the poet essentially insists on its importance. He suggests that it is a subject worthy of poetry. Similarly, he implies the worthiness of working people through characters such as the Miller and the Reeve. Both are physical laborers, and again, by their very appearance they hold significance.

Although work and laborers frequently play central roles in Levine's poetry, the writer also uses such elements in peripheral ways as do Langland and Chaucer. Many of Levine's poems that do not focus on work or laborers per se nonetheless involve the action of work and the people. The narrator in the poem "Uncle" in *1933* (1974) primarily pays homage to his relative. He recounts the wonder he felt towards the man as a child, implying the way he looked up to him, and he laments the fact that he is not able to help his uncle when he is dying. Recounting the elder man's demise, however, the speaker specifically mentions that "In the high work camps / the men break toward dawn" (Levine 30-31). "Salts and Oils," published in the 1985 volume *Sweet Will*, essentially recounts the pains the speaker, who is presumably Levine himself, experienced as he grew into manhood. Among the many accounts listed, but seemingly not of primary importance, the speaker recalls, "A mile from Ebbetts Field, from all / that history, I found Murray, my papa's / buddy, in his greasy truck shop, polishing / replacement parts" (Levine 26-29). Even as late in his career as 1999 in the title poem to the collection *The Mercy*, Levine incorporates work and laborers into a piece that is not primarily concerned with the specifics of working or workers. Recounting the journey of the narrator's mother from Europe to America, the piece tells an additional story: "Italian miners from Piemonte dig / under

towns in western Pennsylvania / only to rediscover the same nightmare / they left at home" (Levine, "The Mercy" 30-33). The role of such laborers and the work they do may seem to have little significance in the particular poems in which the references appear; however, merely mentioning the characters and their labor is important in Levine's canon. It not only suggests that a working class exists and that their labor is a constant part of human life, no matter how far removed one may be from them and it, but it also validates the idea that such people and actions warrant being a part of poetry.

Levine's poetry of labor also has historical precedence in some of the most celebrated poetry of the sixteenth century. Within the tradition of earlier long poems that concern themselves primarily with topics other than labor but that employ references to the theme nonetheless, Edmund Spenser's book-length poem *The Faerie Queen* (1596) also uses the language of work for secondary purposes. Spenser writes:

> In these wylde deserts, [. . .],
> There dwelt a saluage nation, which did liue
> Of stealth and spoile, and making nightly rode
> Into their neighbours borders; ne did giue
> Them selues to any trade, as for to driue
> The painefull plough, or cattell for to breed,
> Or by aduentrous marchandize to thriue;
> But on the labours of poore men to feed,
> And serue their owne necessities with others need. (VI, viii, 35, 307-315)

With references to work and working people, this description resembles the passages cited from *Beowulf*, *Piers Plowman*, and *The Canterbury Tales*. Like the examples from *Beowulf* and *The*

Canterbury Tales, Spenser's words work in a contributing way to a larger piece, characterizing the people with whom the narrator is concerned. Like the examples from *Piers Plowman*, the lines from *The Faerie Queen* focus more insistently on the theme of labor itself. Spenser elaborates on the subject of labor or working people specifically for his larger purpose and thus demonstrates a movement from one period to the next within the history of themes concerning work in English poetry. It is a history, as illustrated by the examples mentioned above, that extends to the poetry of Levine.

For examples of working themes present in sixteenth-century English poetry, one may look also to the writing of William Shakespeare. Many of the dramas, which often contain dialogue written in verse, contain references to work. In fact, one could feasibly argue that the playwright employs such themes in most of the ways already discussed. Although the plot does not revolve around a work motif, the very language of the title of *Love's Labor's Lost* (1593) refers to the theme. Furthermore, a number of characters from Shakespeare's plays are working individuals or, more specifically, physical laborers, who speak in verse. In *Love's Labor's Lost*, the dairymaid Jaquenetta voices a rhymed couplet as she presents a letter to the king: "I beseech your grace let this letter be read. / Our person misdoubts it; 'twas treason, he said" (Shakespeare IV.iii.190-91). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1596), the carpenter Peter Quince gives the prologue to the short play about Pyramus and Thisbe in twenty-five lines of iambic pentameter, and the tinker Tom Snout introduces his character and begins the action of the performance in rhymed couplets. Of particular interest also is the fact that the remaining actors in the dramatic presentation, which is presented in verse, are all working class individuals. Finally, in addition to referring to work in a title of one of his plays and associating poetry with working class individuals by having such people speak in verse, Shakespeare presents what some could argue

is a dramatic performance's equivalence to a poetic description of work. In the beginning of act five of *Hamlet*, the Prince of Denmark happens upon a physical laborer working when he meets a gravedigger doing just what his name denotes, digging a grave. As he is clearing out the burial area, "[t]hrow[ing] up another skull," the laborer sings:

> A pickaxe and a spade, a spade,
>
> For and a shrouding-sheet,
>
> O a pit of clay for to be made
>
> For such a guest is meet. (Shakespeare V.i.92-95)

The song is a description of work. He names his tools, and he explains his labor as he performs it.

Just as Levine's poetry finds precedence in that of Homer, Langland, and Spenser, it also recalls that of Shakespeare. The speaker's words in the poem "Fear and Fame," part of the collection *What Work Is*, eerily resemble those of Shakespeare's gravedigger. Like the play's character, Levine's narrator describes his trade.

> half an hour to dress, wide rubber him 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 and there prepare
>
> the new solutions from the great carboys
>
> of acids lowered to me on ropes [. . .]. (Levine 1-9)

Although Levine's narrator does not specifically sing his words, the metrical rhythm suggests a musical quality. Another parallel exists in the movement and physical space of the speakers. Shakespeare's gravedigger is in a grave: he is down in a hole. Levine's narrator occupies a similar space which he must "descend / step by slow step into." Levine's narrator also recalls the gravedigger when he describes some of the equipment he must use to ply his trade: "wide rubber hip boots," "gauntlets," "a plastic helmet," and "a respirator." These similarities do not, by any means, suggest that Levine used Shakespeare as a model. As critics often argue, authorial intent is hard to establish, but comparing the verses of Shakespeare and Levine shows that Levine's verse has precedence even in the words of an author whom many consider the greatest in the English language.

Another major English literary figure's poetry from the seventeenth century in which one can identify a precedent for verse dealing with work and/or laborers as in Levine's writing is John Milton. Looking at Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), arguably the author's masterpiece and English literature's most known poem, readers find numerous references to work and labor. The subject is closely tied to the four major characters in the narrative at some point or another. Addressing his fellow fallen angels in Hell, a place resembling the factories of Levine's poetic world with molten lava and fiery blast furnaces, Satan argues that "[their] labor must be to pervert" God's will "And out of good [. . .] find means of evil" (Milton I.164,165). Speaking to Adam, Eve describes the first human couple's predicament in prelapsarian Eden:

> Adam, we may we labor still to dress
> This garden, still to tend plant, herb and flow'r,
> Our pleasant task enjoined, but till more hands
> Aid us, the work under our labor grows [. . .]. (Milton IX.205-8)

The need for human labor is reiterated after the fall by Adam when, speaking of himself, but also for the human race, he states, “with labor I must earn / my bread” (Milton X.1054-5). And finally, as if to prove that even God is not exempt from work or labor, Milton has the angel Raphael, working under the direction of God, tell the story of the world’s creation to Adam and Eve.

Milton’s poem is not primarily concerned with work or labor, but the themes do play a role in what is first and foremost a religious poem. The connection between themes of work and religion are also evident in Levine’s poetry, providing yet another example of the tradition in which Levine, consciously or not, is writing. As discussed earlier, “Detroit Grease Shop Poem” has its share of religious undertones. The factory workers are putting together “bright steel *crosses* [Italics mine]” (Levine 1). Although the speaker does not say, one can reasonably assume that the parts must be “anointed” with some sort of grease or oil. This action parallels the anointing rituals performed within many religions, including the Catholic Church’s anointing of the forehead of the sick with oil and its anointing of individuals with oil at baptism. In both instances the individuals are sent out into the world after the anointing, just as are the parts that Levine’s characters construct. Levine subtly incorporates religion through another image reminiscent of a baptism. At the end of the poem water falls on one of the characters “as though it were something / rare and mysterious” (Levine 29-30). Religious symbolism arguably exists in the water falling on the individual. However, it is also suggested through the use of the word “mysterious.” According to the Catholic Church, baptism is one of the holy sacraments that act as concrete evidence for the relationship between God and man and that are often viewed as mysteries.

Compared to "Detroit Grease Shop Poem," with its subtle symbolism and its similarities to *Paradise Lost*, Levine's "A Walk with Tom Jefferson" more specifically follows within the tradition of *Paradise Lost* with its use of religious themes and references to work and labor. Both works in relation to other poems by the authors are long pieces for their respective writers. Milton's poem is twelve books comprised of at least six hundred lines each. Some of the books run over a thousand lines long. "A Walk with Tom Jefferson" runs a total of five hundred and eighty-eight lines, it is the second longest of all of Levine's poems. Furthermore, like *Paradise Lost*, "A Walk with Tom Jefferson" contains several references to work and laborers. The main character of Levine's poem, Tom Jefferson, is a former auto factory worker who would look "[. . .] out the high broken windows / at Dodge Main / [to] see the snow falling [. . .] (Levine 27-29). Also,

> [. . .] Tom Jefferson
>
> --"Same name as the other one"--
>
> remembers Joe [Louis] at seventeen
>
> all one sweltering summer
>
> unloading bales of rags
>
> effortlessly from the trucks
>
> that parked in the alley
>
> behind Wolfe Sanitary Wiping Cloth. (Levine 101-8)

Like *Paradise Lost*, Levine's poem employs explicit religious references. A few examples include the narrator's questioning of the Ten Commandments, his recollection of "[. . .] the way / the Canaanites and the Philistines / fought the Israelites," and both the narrator and Tom

Jefferson's repeated use of the word "'Biblical'" to describe actions and events that occur in the narrative (Levine 376-378, 321, et. al.).

"Detroit Grease Shop Poem" and "A Walk with Tom Jefferson" do have many similarities with *Paradise Lost*, but of course there are crucial differences between the poems. Milton's poem makes use of work and labor imagery to elucidate its religious subject; whereas, Levine's works are primarily concerned with the subjects of work and laborers themselves. However, as if to reverse the way that *Paradise Lost* works, Levine uses religious imagery, symbolism, and references to reach a better understanding of the nature of labor and the effects on those who do it. Through this simple reversal, readers may be able to see yet another way in which Levine follows within the tradition of poetry about work and laborers while at the same time he is able to build upon it or alter it to suit his needs.

Across the Atlantic, in the newly founded colonies that would give rise to the United States, poets were also working in a vein similar to that of Milton. Colonial and early American writers often conflated work and religion in their poetry. As early as 1650, with the publishing Anne Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse*, poets specifically gave religious overtones to the subject of work. Through the use of a heroic couplet, Bradstreet makes the connection in her poem "Of the Four Ages of Man." Speaking in the voice of all mankind, the poem's narrator says, "If to agriculture I was ordained, / Great labours, sorrows, crosses I sustained" (Bradstreet 282-83). Comparing work to religious trials that one must endure, one makes the connection. The connection is present even more so as late as 1794 in Timothy Dwight's "Greenfield Hill: A Poem." In order "To prompt, and guide, [the reader's] steps to heaven," the speaker of Dwight's poem advises:

> '[. . .], *industrious* be your lives;

Alike employ'd yourselves, and wives;

Your children, join'd in labour gay,

With something useful fill each day.' (Dwight VI.31-4)

The connection between work and religion exemplified by these authors is not surprising. The authors, seeking religious freedom in the new world, characteristically infuse their writings with the language and themes of their beliefs. Furthermore, hard work, in the very establishing and the building of the new communities of the colonies, was certainly something that the writers experienced and witnessed on a daily basis. It only makes sense that such themes and language would find their way into the poetry of the time and region.

The connection between work and religion in the poetry of colonial and early America is more complex than it may seem initially. Writers used the two motifs most notably to record and portray their daily lives as the examples from Bradstreet and Dwight above show. The bond between work and religion, however, meant much more to the predominately Protestant populations. Work was not just an action performed to reach a temporal end. It was not undertaken simply to build a town or harvest a field. Instead, to the Protestant writers, work was an essential way in which men and women glorified God and furthered the deity's purpose on earth. Commonplace among early American scholars, work was religious in and of itself for many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Protestant American writers (Thomas xvii, xviii).

The Protestant view of work as an essential part of the religious life is clearly evident in the writings of Edward Taylor. Who better than a minister to most fully express the intricacies of the ways in which the two motifs intertwine? Specifically, Taylor's poem "Huswifery" uses the language and imagery of labor and religion to full effect. The narrator directly addresses God:

Make me, O Lord, thy Spining Wheele compleate.

Thy Holy Worde my Distaff make for mee.

Make mine Affections thy Swift Flyers neate

And make my Soule thy holy Spoole to bee.

My Conversation make to be thy Reele

And reele the yarn thereon spun of thy Wheele.

Make me thy Loome then, knit therein this Twine:

And make thy Holy Spirit, Lord, winde quills:

Then weave the Web thyselfe. The yarn is fine.

Thine Ordinances make my Fulling Mills.

Then dy the same in Heavenly Colours Choice,

All pinkt with Varnisht Flowers of Paradise.

Then cloath therewith mine Understanding, Will,

Affections, Judgement, Conscience, Memory

My Words, and Actions, that their shine may fill

My wayes with glory and thee glorify.

Then mine apparell shall display before yee

That I am Cloathd in Holy robes for glory. (Taylor 1-18)

In being a prayer about labor, the poem demonstrates the way in which the author ties the motifs of work and religion to each other. The specific requests in the piece reveal how the author sees

the confluence of the themes. Referring to the work and the particular tools used to perform such labor, the speaker asks God to be used as a piece of equipment to do his heavenly work.

Here, as is the case with Milton's work, Levine's poetry follows within the tradition. However, it also eventually diverges from the precedent set by the earlier work. Rarely, if ever, does Levine make explicit connections between work and any sort of religious connotations or heavenly purpose. Several poems, of which "Detroit Grease Shop Poem" is the best example, may have suggestions or implications of religious symbolism, but they never spell out any sort of relation between worldly endeavors acting as an extension of God's work. Furthermore, unlike the writings of Bradstreet, Dwight, and Taylor that act as prime examples of the Protestant poetry that endorses an interaction between worldly labor and divine providence, Levine's work does not characteristically attach any positive religious meaning to the work that his characters perform.

Levine's Poetry and the Industrial Revolution

It is not until the coming of industrialism and the Romantic period in both British and American poetry that readers see a marked change in the way that authors use working themes and characters in their verse. Up until the mid- to late- eighteenth century, writers used references to work and those who perform it much as the examples already discussed. Like Homer, Virgil, the *Beowulf* poet, Langland, and Chaucer often do, poets frequently used work elements in order to complete a setting or further the action of a poem. As Virgil's *Georgics* and Hesiod's *Works and Days* demonstrate, some poets referred to the elements in their verse for the purpose of guidance. They created a sort of how-to manual for their readers through the work and the laborers they described. Finally, for about two hundred years, starting in the early to mid- seventeenth century, poets attached religious meanings to the elements. This was

particularly the case in England and early America from the onset of the Puritan Revolution and the founding of the colonies.

With the coming of the industrial revolution, however, change was inevitable. For many poets, the main focus during this period radically shifts from referring to work for passing, advisory, or religious ends to the actual work and the laboring class itself. In particular, poets characteristically revealed the harsh conditions in which the people, even children, worked as they populated grim settings with characters whose lives were anything but free. In the 1789 "The Chimney Sweeper," William Blake's child laborer tells readers "in soot I sleep" as he dreams "That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned and Jack, / Were all of them locked up in coffins of black" (4, 11-12). The blackness inherent in the soot in which the young boy must rest and the coffins in which the others are finally placed suggest the poet's opinions of the squalid conditions the children endured before death. Percy Bysshe Shelley provides another indictment of the conditions and situation in his poem "Song to the Men of England," published in 1839 but written two decades earlier. The narrator of the poem sternly asks:

I

Men of England, wherefore plough
For the lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear?

II

Wherefore feed, and clothe, and save
From the cradle to the grave,
Those ungrateful drones who would

Drain your sweat—nay, drink your blood?

III

Wherefore, Bees of England, forge

Many a weapon, chain, scourge,

That these stingless drones may spoil

The forced produce of your toil? (Shelley 1-12)

Blake's and Shelley's words differ from the earlier poetry in that they do not describe work or attempt to transform it into worthy acts that lead to some positive end. Instead, the words specifically convey a negative meaning. In these two poems, no good is attained through the toil of the laborers involved. Furthermore, readers see that, unlike in the poems from earlier times, the authors direct their attention fully on the actual workers themselves. With the titles "The Chimney Sweeper" and "Song to the Men of England," Blake and Shelley explicitly state the subjects of the poems, thereby suggesting the significance of labor and of the laborers. Levine's poetry closely follows within the tradition of Blake's and Shelley's scathing censures of the demeaning effects of industrial labor.[15]

For the most part until the Romantic period, the individuals who were writing poetry were of the upper class, or at least not part of the laboring or working class. Some noted examples include Chaucer, Spenser, John Donne, Milton, Alexander Pope, and John Dryden. Because of their class, these writers provide an outside view when they are writing about

[15] Many scholars and critics previously have examined Levine's descent from the English Romantic Tradition in general. For more information on identified and discussed connections, see Jonathan N. Barron's "Another Faith": The Wordsworthian Tradition in 20th -Century American Poetry: Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, James Wright and a Few Other Poets"; Jeanne Suzanne Prine's "Inside and Outside: The Romantic Tradition from Wordsworth to Wright"; Edward Hirsch's "Naming the Lost: The Poetry of Philip Levine'; Paul Mariani's "Keeping the Covenant: A Look at Philip Levine's *A Walk with Tom Jefferson*"; and William Pitt Root's "Songs of the Working Class" among others. However, for the purpose of this study, I have chosen to only bring up Levine's focus on and identification with the common worker.

physical labor and the people who perform it. On the other hand, during the Romantic period, some very important writers who were, indeed, members of the working class found marked success. This is not to say that people of the laboring class did not write poetry before the period. William J. Christmas points this fact out in his 2001 study *The Lab'ring Muse: Work, Writing, and the Social Order in English Plebian Poetry, 1730-1830*. In his introduction, Christmas provides a succinct assessment of poetry from working class individuals before the first half of the 1700s:

> The eighteenth century was the first period in English literary history to see the ranks of published plebian poets increase dramatically. Although previous generations could boast an established writer or two of plebian origin—like Ben Jonson, whose bricklaying experience was well known in the early seventeenth century, or John Taylor, who parlayed his background as a Thames bargeman into a career as "the King's Water-Poet" some years later—far more self taught poets from an array of laboring backgrounds began appearing in print from 1730 onward. (17)

Christmas looks at some fifteen poets who were part of the working class during the one hundred years his study covers, devoting extended attention to Stephen Duck and Mary Collier. An important point to keep in mind when looking at Christmas's study, however, is that all of them are relatively minor within the canon of English literature.

In the Romantic period, readers begin to see working class poets effectively rise above the relative obscurity modern day critics often assign to their precursors. Two strong examples exist in John Clare and Robert Burns, both of whom were primarily fieldworkers before they wrote poetry. As scholar Christine Gallant points out, Clare is "not exactly canonical"; however,

his reputation has been improving through the increased attention he has received within the past few years. Jonathan Bate, who has produced studies on Shakespeare and Wordsworth, and who has edited the thirteen-volume *Oxford English Literary History*, published both a six-hundred page comprehensive biography on the nineteenth-century poet entitled *John Clare: A Biography* and a collection of Clare's poetry entitled *"I Am": The Selected Poetry of John Clare* in 2003. Burns is unquestionably part of the accepted literary canon and his importance as an individual writer clearly adds to the legitimacy of the working class poetry he and others produce.

Another poet from the Romantic period who contributes to the legitimacy of working-class poets as a group is John Keats. He, like Duck, Clare, and Burns, is from a laboring class upbringing and environment. However, he is also quite different from these other poets in that his poetry is not aimed at his own class. Gallant sums up these distinctions when she posits that placing Keats within the tradition of labor poetry is "hard, because he was of the urban working class[,] trying to write of the upper classes." Because of these characteristics, Keats's place within the tradition is limited.

Levine's line of descent from the working class poetry of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England is perhaps as tenuous as Keats's contemporary connections to it, but it does exist nonetheless. Although Levine is from a middle-class family, a fact all too many modern-day scholars fail to point out, Levine spent a good many of his youthful years working at blue-collar jobs alongside lower and lower-middle class laborers. However, around the age of twenty-four, he left his industrial jobs behind and devoted more of his concentration on writing poetry.

Levine's progress from struggling to survive in the daily grind of industrial America to supporting himself through a poetics infused with elements of the very blue-collar life he once

lived allows the writer an interesting place in the tradition of working class poetry. Having worked in factories at various physically demanding positions, Levine is a descendent of the poets who performed physical labor before they entered poetry – Jonson, Duck, Burns, and Clare being among them. From this perspective, Levine is able to offer an inside view of his subject, a characteristic of his writing of which the poet is quite aware. At the same time, by having left industrial labor, Levine is capable of working outside of the tradition. He provides an odd parallel to Keats on this point. Both characteristically transcend their working-class origins. Keats, of the working class, went beyond his upbringing by choosing to write for the upper-classes, employing themes, subjects, and the language with which the upper-class would often identify. Levine, in the course of his professional life, goes beyond his factory employment and middle-class upbringing to the less physically demanding life of a poet. The poets' situations, then, inversely stand beside each other. Whereas Keats remained in a working class and wrote poetry that would appeal to classes above his own, Levine has risen above his class origins, but continues to write about and appeal to it.

Poets of the American Romantic period were also writing about similar issues. Because industrialism had not yet gained the prominence that it held in England, instead of the outright condemnation expressed by many of the English Romantics and even more of the Victorian poets that followed, poets of nineteenth-century America provided another view on the subjects of work and laborers. One particular poet of the period and place "from whom [Levine] take[s] many cues" is Walt Whitman (Personal interview). Widely regarded as one of the founding fathers of American poetry, Whitman frequently wrote verse associated with the working class or common individuals like Levine after him and Shelley and countless others before him. In "I Hear America Singing" from *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes about a variety of manual

laborers, men and women alike. He begins the poem, "I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear" (1). In the same tone, he ends the piece with the workers all "Singing with open mouths their strong and melodious songs" (11). Instead of focusing on the toil and exploitation of his subjects as do Blake and Shelley, Whitman romanticizes his laborers, imbuing them with a sense of pride and optimism indicated particularly through the fact that the people are singing "carols" in voices that are "strong and melodious." Levine does, in fact, resemble Whitman in that he often gives his modern day industrial laborers a sense of honor and worth, but as is the case with the religious aspects of his poems, he rarely, if ever, presents such value in an obvious a manner. Levine presents the honor and pride of his characters through their work and their working habits.[16] They are not honorable and worthy of being written about in poetry because the narrator and therefore the observing author says they should be, but rather because of who they are and what they do. Their worthiness and import are inherent within themselves and their very actions.

Another important way in which Levine descends from Whitman is through the use of language and form. Both poets write in a language that is characteristic of or genuine to their subjects. As several critics commonly point out, both poets predominately employ the language of the common man to convey their ideas, reacting against the language of the courts and the upper classes so often used by many of their predecessors. Whitman and Levine strive to write

[16] Levine himself discusses these different ways of presenting the working class in his poetry and the poetry of Whitman in the personal interview with the author serving as Appendix B. More specifically, in response to questions of what Levine sees himself accomplishing through his poetry, Levine says, "I think that if you looked at poetry before I got into it – before I wrote my poetry – you would find something was missing: my poetry [. . .] [a]nd the poetry of a working people that didn't sentimentalize from the point of view of someone who did the work and worked with the people. I don't think much of it is there. Muriel Rukeyser writes as an observer and often sentimentalizes. David Ignatow tries, but he's rarely a good enough poet to do it. Williams writes as an observer – extraordinary observer – extraordinary, but I can't think of somebody who . . . as Whitman writes as an observer, and again sentimentalizes, makes heroic some of the people he's writing about. I don't make them heroic: I make them who they are, or that's my hope" (Personal interview).

in a language that is free from affectations often associated with high social standing. Both poets write verse that diverges from the traditional closed forms dominant before their careers, allowing them to convey their ideas in a way that is, perhaps, more true to their subjects.[17] Levine, after having started his career writing in traditional fixed accentual meters, has turned his attention more often than not to syllabic meter, a form more readily representative of the working class than any traditional, closed form could possibly be.[18] In *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-century Poetry in English*, Michael Hulse supports this idea through his definition of "Syllabics" when he writes, "Syllabic prosody observed a syllable-count but dispensed with a stress pattern, and was thus better able to accommodate natural spoken rhythms [. . .]" (530).[19] Levine writes in a "more working class manner" through his syllabic lines in that the lines are based on a unit of measurement that is simpler and more connected to the speech of common subjects than accentual measurements, which no normal individual uses in a structured form in everyday conversation. Although Levine's lines may contain a formal structure in being a set number of syllables in length, the lines are more closely identifiable with common speech

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[17] The poetry from the early stages of Levine's career (most notably contained in his first and second books *On the Edge* and *Not This Pig*) frequently follows within the rules of strict closed forms. However, since the publication of those books, Levine gradually has strayed from such poetry in favor of the more syllabic-centered poetry he is most commonly associated with now. He has not consistently written poetry within any traditional closed form for more than thirty years now. Because of the length of time that has passed since Levine's poetry was dominated by formal closed forms, critics, scholars, and readers alike no longer categorize the poet as a formalist or as a writer working within traditional forms.

[18] For more information on and discussion of Levine's use of syllabics and its tie to common speech, see William Stafford, "*A Poet with Something to Tell You*," *On the Poetry of Philip Levine: Stranger to Nothing*, Ed. Christopher Buckley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) 135-139; and Dave Smith "From 'Short Reviews,'" *On the Poetry of Philip Levine: Stranger to Nothing*, Ed. Christopher Buckley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) 203-207.

[19] In the definition for "Syllabics," Hulse specifically takes his ideas from and credits them to "Robert Bridges, who began in 1913 to experiment with what he termed 'neo-Milton syllabic,' on the grounds that '[the] accentual (dot and go one) bumping' of traditional isochronous metre 'is apt to make ordinary words ridiculous'. [. . .] . 'Poor Poll' (published in 1921) was the first of these poems; Bridges developed his twelve-syllable 'loose Alexandrines' for use throughout *The Testament of Beauty* (1929). Book length studies of Bridges by Elizabeth Cox Wright (1951) and Donald E. Stanford (1978) argue that, in the British poet's use, the syllabic line replaces the traditional foot as the unit of rhythm" (530).

because the accentual stresses vary naturally as they do in normal speech. People rarely speak in any formal established meter, but they always speak in lines of syllables.

Conclusion

Levine follows a tradition of working class poetry in the twentieth-century, a tradition that includes many modern writers. Today, as two thousand years ago, poems still contain references to work and laborers. However, the use of such references has changed over the years for a variety of reasons. In ancient literature as well as early English literature, the subjects appeared often simply because they were a part of daily life, and as such, they found their way into the written word. Later as Milton and colonial American writers demonstrate, work took on an added significance as man's duty to God. Then, with the coming and prominence of industrialism, poets like Blake and Shelley revealed a sinister side to manual wage labor, particularly in factories. At the same time and soon after in America, Whitman and others were praising manual labor and instilling in it a sense of honor and pride because of the role physical labor played in building a new nation.

Critics, scholars, and readers alike recognize that work (manual factory labor in particular) plays a crucial part in Levine's poetry. Although only one poem, "An Abandoned Factory, Detroit," in Levine's first published volume, *On the Edge* (1963), concerns work as its specific overall subject (describing labor, its effects, and individuals who perform it), subsequent volumes from the poet clearly incorporate and concern the topic far more often. The first section of Levine's second collection, *Not This Pig* (1968), contains eight poems, six of which employ some idea about work (particularly manual and/or factory labor). At least half of the thirty-one poems making up Levine's most recent collection, *Breath*, make use of work in one way or another. Some of the poems, like "The Genius," "A View of Home," or "The Two," revolve

around or originate from work. Other poems, like “Praise,” “Keats in California,” and “The Lesson,” use the topic subtly or peripherally as part of the background or as a means to an end as far as the main point of the poem as a whole is concerned.

Levine’s poems also make use of specifically different aspects about work. For the most part, Levine’s poems concern industrial work or manual labor in particular. A cursory look at any of the poet’s collected volumes substantiates this point. “An Abandoned Factory, Detroit” again is a perfect example. It focuses on the work performed in a factory. In “Making It New” from *Ashes: Poems New and Old* (1979), the speaker helps perform manual road work. The 1994 collection *The Simple Truth* contains the poem “Listen Carefully” about a woman who “makes good money / doing piece work, assembling the cups that cap / the four ends of a cross of a universal joint” (Levine 20-22).

Levine also writes poems about and concerning work from different points of view. Written from the third person point-of-view, “The Wife of the Foundry Worker” in *Red Dust* (1971) creates and expresses a sense of objective distance about the frustrations resulting from factory work. Poems written from a first person point-of-view, including “And the Trains Go On” (*They Feed They Lion* 1976), “Making Soda Pop” (*One for the Rose* 1981), and “Making It Work” (*A Walk With Tom Jefferson* 1988) express a more personal or subjective take on the subject. Levine even writes some of his verse concerning work from a second person point-of-view, including “You Can Cry” (*One for the Rose* 1981), “Look” (*Sweet Will* 1985), and “Today and Two Thousand Years from Now” (*Breath* 2004). Poems written from this point-of-view help Levine create a personal connection to his readers, putting them in the very situations he describes.

The poems that Levine writes dealing with work make use of time in different ways. Some poems take place before the speaker or the poem's subject goes to work. These include "Look" (*Sweet Will* 1985), "Every Blessed Day" (*What Work Is* 1991), and "Photography 2" (*The Mercy* 1999). Other poems, like "Rain" (*One for the Rose* 1981), "When the Shift was Over" (*Breath* 2004), and "The Two" (*Breath* 2004) describe events that take place after characters get off or away from work. Levine often goes so far as to create even further distance time-wise between workers and their labor by having the poems told by a speaker who looks retrospectively at work. These poems include "The Everlasting Sunday" (*Not This Pig* 1968), "Dawn, 1952" (*7 Years from Somewhere* 1979), and "Growth" (*What Work Is* 1991). Most importantly, many of Levine's poems describe work as it is being performed. Poems in this category are "Detroit Grease Shop Poem" (*They Feed They Lion* 1972), "Fear and Fame" (*What Work Is* 1991), and "Making It Work" (*What Work Is* 1991).

Another important aspect to Levine's poems about work is that many of them reveal or describe the effects of work. Some describe how work affects the different types of relationships. Poems about family relationships include "Among Children" (*What Work Is* 1991), which concerns the effects of work on the relationship between fathers and children, "Every Blessed Day" (*What Work Is* 1991), which also concerns a father/son relationship, and "Look" (*Sweet Will* 1985), which involves the effects of work on a mother and son. Some of Levine's poems also deal with sibling relationships and work. "You Can Have It" (*7 Years from Somewhere* 1979) and "What Work Is" (*What Work Is* 1991) concern brothers, and "Listen Carefully" revolves around the relationship between a brother and sister. Levine writes of the effects of work on husbands and wives in "The Wife of the Foundry Worker" (*Red Dust* 1971).

Levine also portrays the effects of work on relationships within working environments, most commonly among coworkers. Levine presents some of the relationships negatively as he does in "Sweet Will" (*Sweet Will* 1985), some positively as in "You Can Cry" (*One for the Rose* 1981), and others somewhat ambivalently as in "Detroit Grease Shop Poem" (*They Feed They Lion* 1972) and "Today and Two Thousand Years from Now" (*Breath* 2004). Another relationship within working environments that Levine portrays concerns workers and their superiors or bosses. This relationship and the effects on it are expressed both subtly, through an absence of the superiors in some poems, like "Growth," and more explicitly, through a direct reference to the relationship in poems again like "Detroit Grease Shop Poem" (*They Feed They Lion* 1972) and "Today and Two Thousand Years from Now" (*Breath* 2004).

As important as is each of the aspects above in relation to Levine's portrayal of work in his poems, the most important element Levine connects to work in his verse is the effect of the actual process of doing work on the laborer him/herself. Study of this characteristic in Levine's poetry reveals that the poet focuses on two particular effects: physical and mental. Several poems from "An Abandon Factory, Detroit" in Levine's first collection in 1963 to "When the Shift was Over" in his most recent volume published in 2004 refer to some negative physical effect precipitated by work, whether it be the act of being tired, damage to or the deterioration of a body part, or the "[. . .] taste [of] / nickel under [the] tongue" (Levine "When the Shift" 4-5). Similarly, many of Levine's poems reveal some sort of mental damage resulting from manual or factory work. Such mental damage ranges from the sense of the loss of self expressed in "The Everlasting Sunday" (*Not This Pig* 1968) to the feelings of defeat, helplessness, and separation experienced by the woman in "One" (*One for the Rose* 1981).

Poems from the beginning of Levine's career to the most recent years of Levine's writing life illustrate results from and connections to work in a variety of ways, so much so that a complete understanding of the poet's oeuvre can be reached only through a close examination of how the idea of work acts in each instance in Levine's poetry. Such analysis, while providing insight to Levine's verse as an entity in itself, will, at the same time, reveal the progress of working class poetry as a genre when viewed in light of the poetic tradition within which Levine is writing.

Chapter 4

Philip Levine's Presentation of Class Struggle:

A Marxist Reading of His Poetry in Part

In the essay "In Search of a New World: The Anarchist Dream in the Poetry of Philip Levine," Robert Hedin opens by arguing that "Levine memorializes people who have been [. . .] the principal victims of an unforgiving, uncompromising system that is based, above all else, on human exploitation" (296). He looks at specific poems to support his thesis, but only in passing mentions the elements of work and labor in "Baby Villon," "Saturday Sweeping," and "To Cipriano, in the Wind" that might come to mind regarding human exploitation. Hedin focuses particular attention on Levine's affinity towards the Spanish Civil War and its participants from the early part of the twentieth century. Arguing that "Of all his characters, clearly the most recurring and significant are the [political conflict's] anarchists, primarily Beunaverntura Durruti and Francisco Ascaso, whose struggles against an unjust social order Levine honors, if not nobilitates, throughout his work," he provides an analysis of "Francisco, I'll Bring You Red Carnations" and "Gift for a Believer." (297). Hedin concludes by calling attention to three additional marginalized human subjects, trying to make sense of their lots in Levine's poems "A New Day," "Letters for the Dead," and "The Suit."

Hedin's evidence illustrates a problem present in much of the criticism concerning Levine's use of working class elements. The critic's interpretations of Levine's poetry do not give any sustained analysis as to the ideas of work. Hedin's analysis of approximately eighteen hundred words leaves a gap in the study of the poetry for future scholars and critics to fill. Considering that Hedin looks to nine poems for evidence, each poem, at best, receives an

average 200 to 250 words of textual analysis. Granted, Hedin devotes more attention to some poems than to others, but still the discussion falls short.

Other articles that investigate the working class elements of the poems also provide only a cursory view of the subject. In "Naming the Lost: The Poetry of Philip Levine" (1989), Edward Hirsch provides a general overview of Levine's poetry from the publication of the author's first collection of work, *On The Edge*, to the 1988 volume *A Walk With Tom Jefferson*. In the summative piece, Hirsch looks at Levine's eleven major collections (up to 1989), discussing each in an average of about two paragraphs, all the while examining elements in addition to working class themes and characters, including issues of tone, structure, and voice. As a highly-qualified critic and practicing poet, even Hirsch cannot provide thorough textual analysis in so few words. David St. John, a former student of Levine, provides an example similar to Hirsch's. In his 1986 article "Where the Angels Come toward Us: The Poetry of Philip Levine" St. John gives a summary of Levine's poetry up to the publication of the 1985 collection *Sweet Will*, and like Hirsch, he discusses a variety of elements in Levine's poetry, including the working class themes, attitudes, situations, and characters.

Although the articles by Hirsch and St. John are only two examples, they represent much of the work that exists on Levine's poetry and its working class elements. Reviews of the poet's books provide even less textual analysis about the subject, for scholarly criticism is not the main purpose of a review. This lack of textual analysis about the subject creates a void in the understanding of the writing. Many critics and reviewers make overarching statements saying that "Philip Levine's poetry is characterized by [. . .] a rage against objectification," and that "[the poet's] primary impulse has been to memorialize the details and remember the exploitations" (Hirsch 344). They argue, among other points, that "the core of many of Levine's

poems [is] the harsh recesses of the working world" (St. John 278). Yet, they rarely follow such bold pronouncements with thorough analyses of the poems to reveal the roots of their claims. Yes, they do provide examples of passages that prove Levine's working class leanings. However, anyone reading Levine's writing recognizes the poet's concern for the working class. Picking out specific examples of where Levine reveals his affinity for the group is not difficult.

Critical work on Levine's poetry must move forward. Critics not only should designate Levine as working class poet, but they also should delve deep into his verse, noting subtle nuances and intricacies regarding working class elements at play. Only then can a full understanding of Levine's poetry as a whole can even begin to be understood by critics and readers alike. To this end, a Marxist perspective to which the poetry naturally lends itself through its use of working class elements is helpful in providing insight that is lacking in current criticism about the poetry. Arguing that Levine's is "a poetry rooted in the yearnings and aspirations of the working class" and that the poet "is a participant in class disenfranchisement," Sally A. Lodge briefly quotes from the poem "One for the Rose" in her review of the collection of the same title (84). Lodge's review and reviews like it illustrate my argument. Instead of observations that lead to overarching generalizations, a Marxist critical approach exposes the seeds from which those very observations and generalizations grow.

Marx makes many statements about class in his writings, and to apply each of them, or even a select few, to specific Levine poems would require far more space than this discussion is intended to fill. However, any discussion of Marx and his theories involving class requires consideration of his single most influential statement concerning the opposition between classes. At the outset of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and his associate Frederick Engels assert that "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (55).

Using this statement, critics of Levine's work from the past would essentially make the simplified argument that Levine writes about class and particularly about the struggle of the working class against their employers. Many concrete examples applying Marx's theory to specific pieces by Levine demonstrate Levine's complex portrayal of the struggle between classes.

For the purpose of this discussion, Hedin's article again provides a useful starting point. In the first few paragraphs, the critic states,

> More than any other, Durruti, to whom Levine dedicates *The Names of the Lost*, carries a utopian dream of the state, a 'new world' as he calls it, freed of history and time wherein all tyranny is abolished and the individual is allowed to express the innate goodness and boundlessness of the self. In a interview published in the *Montreal Star* on October 30, 1936, a month before his death near the Model Prison in Barcelona, Durruti was quoted as saying: "We are going to inherit the earth. The *bourgeoisie* may blast and ruin this world before they leave the stage of history. But we carry a new world in our hearts." This vision, echoing the Old Testament prophecy that says the meek shall inherit the earth, is one to which Levine alludes in nearly all of his major political poetry. (297)

One of the article's main points is to argue that some of Levine's poems, and particularly those dealing with the Spanish Civil War, overtly portray and comment on the struggle between classes. Referring to the attention that Levine gives to Buenaverntura Durruti, Hedin comments on the tendency for the poet's verse to incorporate class conflict. He then briefly demonstrates his point by looking at two specific poems that through their subjects, the Anarchists' war against Franco's oppression, reveal one way in which Levine writes about class struggles.

Writing about the Spanish Civil War and its participants is definitely one of the most obvious ways that Levine looks at the struggle between classes within his poetry. A poem originating from and rooted in a civil war characteristically focuses on, or inherently suggests, fighting. However, Levine also explicitly refers to class struggles within poems. Hedin provides an example of how the poet does this in "Francisco, I'll Bring You Red Carnations," a poem which one would expect to find such instances since it is about the Spanish Civil War. Summarizing the action of the narrative, Hedin points out that "among the 871,251 dead [Levine's narrator surveys at a cemetery], the narrator finds the same perpetuation of classes, the same divisions of prosperity and squalor, as he finds in the cities of the living" (Hedin 298). The fact that Levine conveys as much in the specific poem that Hedin analyzes is no surprise, for the poem is specifically about class divisions and one particular war incurred by them.

"The Communist Party" and "Our Reds" work in ways similar to "Francisco, I'll Bring You Red Carnations." First and foremost, the titles call to mind the politics of class struggle. Marx argued that Communism would be the ultimate result of the struggle between the proletariat and bourgeois classes; red is the color most often associated with Communism. In addition to their titles, the contents of each poem specifically refer to class struggles. In "Our Reds," the narrator recalls "the three wild Reds /of [his] school days" (1-2). One of the group "would rise in class, unasked, / to interrupt 'the tired fascist swill'" (17-18) and proclaim

> "The proper function of a teacher
> is to inform the unformed cadres
> of the exploited classes regarding
> the nature of their enslavement
> to an estate sold to the masters

of the means of production." (Levine 20-25)

In the same way, the gathering's attendees in "The Communist Party" "sp[i]n their own monotonous music: 'proletariat,' 'bourgeoisie,' 'Trotskyist'" (Levine 34-35). Again, these examples, with their explicit references to and uses of the terminology of the struggle between the classes, come as no surprise. Furthermore, the titles of the poems go a long way in telling readers some of the content existing within them.

However, the struggle between classes exists in Levine's poetry in ways that are not always as obvious as the examples above may indicate. Not every poem of Levine's concerned with or employing class struggle is specifically about the subject itself. In fact, the poems above are not specifically about a struggle between classes. They just contain overt examples of Levine's references to and uses of the topic. Sometimes the issue is only suggested or hinted at through descriptions, themes, allusions, tone, etc. Looking closely at Levine's poetry, the reader can see that the writer conveys the struggle between classes through tone. More specifically, through the subtle revelation of his narrators' attitudes toward their subjects whatever they might be, Levine is able to reveal the struggle between classes in his poems in a manner that is not particularly overt, but is effective nonetheless.

One such poem that uses tone to portray the struggle between the classes is "Barbie & Ken, Ken & Barbie" from the 1968 collection *Not This Pig*. The basic subject of the poem concerns a couple, presumably of the upper class, but definitely not of the working-class so often associated with Levine. The title and the names of the two characters give some hint as to the charmed life led by the pair. As their toy-doll monikers suggest, they lead a playful, if not privileged, existence. Their All-American days are nothing like the mechanical existence of the very factory workers that make the actual toys themselves. The narrator describes Ken's life:

Ken has a big job at Castle Air Force Base
where the work is challenging and the future
lies on the cutting room table, docile and clear
for Ken, who with scissors unwrinkles its face.

Ken drives to Paso Robles on the weekend
in a sports car that runs on needle bearings;
he takes the turns hard and as he does he sings
for up ahead is the ocean and the sand. (Levine 1-8)

In these two four-line stanzas, the narrator presents a life anyone would be happy to call his own. Ken works for the government, perhaps suggesting a sense of belonging in itself, at a job that engages him. As the narrator's words imply, Ken's only real problem is figuring out how to spend his time, and even that is not hard work since his "future / lies [. . .] docile and clear." Such a description of life is a far cry from the rough life any given factory worker leads. Furthermore, being at the mercy of their employers and the economics of the day, a working class individual's life is anything but "clear"; it is hazy at best. The second stanza reinforces the idea that Ken leads the good life. On his days away from work, instead of resting or recuperating for the working week to come, Ken enjoys riding in his fashionable car to the seaside. His happiness is all the more apparent in the fact that he "sings" as he travels.

As the next stanza reveals, Ken's relationship with Barbie, the person he will meet at the shore, is no less charmed than is his working life. Waiting for her male counterpart, "Barbie in a pink negligee, Barbie / waiting in her tall pink pumps, golf clubs ready" is the epitome, presumably, of what every man wants in a woman (9-10). She is sexy and she is

accommodating, perhaps to the point of servitude. Up until this point in the poem, the narrator seems to relate a fairly straight-forward account of a man going to visit his girlfriend on his time off. However, the final two stanzas go on to suggest otherwise.

> Soon they'll be together, brother and sister,
> Barbie and Ken, sharing a toothbrush, sharing
> a toilet, a tub, sharing the same old song
> that freezes on their lips, sharing each other
>
> for that breathless moment when the elders
> bow to their credit card. Sundays would be hell
> what with packing, parting, and the long haul
> if brother and sister weren't such good soldiers. (Levine 13-20)

With line thirteen, Levine disrupts his reader's understanding and begins to reveal the narrator's true feelings toward the subject.

Before the revelation that Ken and Barbie are siblings, the poem could be seen as an account of any man's upper-class life, suggested by the "sports car," the "ocean" shore dwelling, and the "golf clubs." However, it is hard to take the narrator's description of the two as "brother and sister" at face value. Nothing before or after really reinforces it. Perhaps, the narrator means that they are related in that they are both of the same class and that they both lead the same well-to-do privileged lives. If Ken and Barbie are siblings, something is amiss. In addition to the obvious disgust towards the two created through the description of the relationship, the narrator implies that he associates some sort of moral deficiency with the two people. They are brother and sister, after all, and the type of relationship they have, in which she greets him at the door in

a “negligee” and “tall pink pumps,” clearly refers to an abomination. The narrator clearly does not like his subjects, and he wants his readers to feel the same way.

The narrator further reveals his disdain for Ken and Barbie through the rest of the poem. In a subtle, but scathing, indictment against Ken and Barbie, he reveals that the only way the two have reached their status is by “sharing each other,” or by essentially keeping “it,” being money, in the family, passing it down from generation to generation as “sharing the same old song / that freezes on their lips” connotes. This sharing of each other, and by implication keeping of wealth within the small family unit of themselves, has allowed them to amass a fortune. They have so much money that it causes others to “bow to their credit.” Through this tongue-in-cheek description, the narrator conveys the feeling that such credit is something of which he can only dream. Furthermore, he metaphorically places an exclamation point on his feelings by ironically comparing the couple to “good soldiers,” as if each of their lives is something which they must fight to survive.

Levine’s speaker never specifies his feelings toward his subject. Consequently, the poem never explicitly presents a struggle between the classes with direct references or descriptions. However, the choice of words and the tone they convey, in fact, do create just such a struggle. The narrator’s descriptions are at direct odds with the subject he is depicting. This is evident in the negative light in which he eventually presents Ken and Barbie by the end of the poem. Instead of terminating the poem at the end of the third stanza, leaving readers with no reason to dislike the two individuals, he specifically chooses to finish the piece only after he has brought attention to what he sees as their shortcomings and flaws. By doing this, he ultimately reveals that he disagrees with or is in a struggle against their way of living.

Levine also suggests a struggle between classes in the poem “Facts,” published about thirty years later. Like the narrator of “Barbie & Ken, Ken & Barbie,” the narrator of “Facts” never openly describes a class struggle, but he does communicate a tension between classes through his words. The poem presents the inhabitants of two cities, Princeton, New Jersey, and Cleveland, Ohio, as players struggling to maintain an appearance of respectability. Instead of a struggle between the narrator and his subject, as in “Barbie & Ken, Ken & Barbie,” “Facts” presents the idea of class struggle in others and their actions as it is observed by the narrator.

Counting on the associations Princeton has with the upper class in the general reader’s mind, the narrator subtly portrays the greater issue of class struggle through the actions and thoughts of three particular characters. He opens the poem:

> The bus station in Princeton, New Jersey,
>
> has no men’s room. I had to use one like mad,
>
> but the guy behind the counter said, “Sorry,
>
> but you know what goes on in bus station men’s rooms.” (Levine, “Facts” 1-4)

The attendant’s words inform the narrator of the absence of what he is looking for, but they also subtly create a snobbish air of respectability, as if to really say, “what goes on in bus station men’s rooms” would never happen here, and the people who participate in such actions are beneath us. The attendant creates a separation, and thus a tension, rooted in class through his statement. Presumably, he is above the people who would use the men’s restroom.

Levine again puts Princeton and its associations within the general reader’s mind to his use elsewhere in the poem. The narrator notes that

> F. Scott Fitzgerald attended Princeton. A student
>
> pointed out the windows of the suite he occupied.

We were on our way to the train station to escape

to New York City, and the student may have been lying. (Levine, "Facts" 13-16)

The stanza appears simple enough, but when one considers the decadent and privileged life led by the Jazz Age author and his novels that often portray the lives of upper class individuals, the purpose of the lines takes on added meaning. It is clearly meant to connect high class with the city.[20] Levine means for Princeton, New Jersey, to be synonymous with the upper echelon of society. The fact that "[the] student / pointed out the windows of the suite [Fitzgerald] occupied" is also important in order to understand the poem. The pupil wants the narrator, who is presumably Levine himself, to know about the connection. Through the act of name dropping, the student wants to impress the speaker, as if to say, "You know we are important because of the great people who went to school here." Instead of portraying class struggle by creating a tension stemming from separation as the narrator does with the station attendant, Levine depicts the struggle in the student's case through the idea of inclusion. Referring again to the instance with the student, the speaker later says

I don't blame the student for lying, especially

to a teacher. He may have been ill at ease

in my company, for I am an enormous man given

to long bouts of silence as I brood on facts. (Levine, "Facts" 26-29)

As the narrator's explanation suggests, perhaps the pupil felt a need to bring up Fitzgerald because he wanted to appear worthy to his companion, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet. For whatever reason (as a student in the presence of a teacher or as a reader in the presence of a

[20] The references and allusions to F. Scott Fitzgerald and Princeton subtly emphasize Levine's focus on class struggle. Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* has Princeton as its principle location where the action occurs. Through the main character and his relationships with others in the novel Fitzgerald plays out class differences, particularly those between the lower and upper classes.

writer), the pupil felt inferior to his companion. In order to abate a feeling of inadequacy within himself, a struggle perhaps not of particular classes but one certainly symbolic of such in that by associating with the literary giant he feels on par with him, the student literally struggles to appear to be more than something he may be in reality. Although it could be coincidence, the ingenious allusion to "class" in any teacher-student relationship should not be discounted in this instance.

The relationship between the narrator and his subject also plays an important part in a third account of Princeton in "Facts." However, in this third instance, the narrator's connection to the person about whom he is talking is much stronger than it is in the previous two examples. Instead of recounting a story about a bus station attendant met by chance or a young student assigned as his driver, the narrator tells a story about a friend of his, making the issues he is relating to readers all the more real to himself. The struggle to identify with the upper class that the narrator has been describing is a very real component of his own life. That his friend struggles with the same situation is perceived by the narrator. Describing the transportation he must take in order to depart Princeton, the narrator recounts

> The train is called "The Dinky." It takes you only
> a few miles away to a junction where you can catch
> a train to Grand Central or – if you're scared –
> to Philadelphia. From either you can reach Cleveland.
>
> My friend Howie wrote me that he was ashamed
> to live in a city whose most efficient means of escape
> is called "The Dinky." If he'd invest in a Rolls,

even one with a Packard grill, he'd feel differently. (Levine, "Facts" 17-24)

Similar to the previous two instances, the poet is counting on and employing the general assumptions of his audience that associate the city with the upper classes of society. The narrator recognizes that his friend views the train, because of its moniker, as beneath him, making his city too a source of embarrassment. According to Howie, it's as if the city should have more pride than to rely on something as small as "The Dinky."

The lines describing the "The Dinky" and the narrator's friend's attitude specifically concern Princeton, but they also make reference to Cleveland, Ohio, another city which Levine uses to portray the class struggle he sees taking place all around him. Immediately after relating the event in the bus station at the poem's beginning, the narrator describes a physical symbol that works in conjunction with the more abstract symbolism of the characters' actions throughout the piece and through which class struggle concretely materializes.

If you take a '37 Packard grill and split it down
the center and reduce the angle by 18^0 and reweld it,
you'll have a perfect grill for a Rolls Royce
just in case you ever need a new grill for yours. (Levine, "Facts" 4-8)

The speaker then goes on to immediately connect the symbol with Cleveland.

I was not born in Cleveland, Ohio. Other people
were, or so I have read, and many have remained,
which strikes me as an exercise in futility
greater even than saving your pennies to buy a Rolls. (Levine, "Facts" 9-12)

As he does with his audience's basic assumptions about and associations with Princeton, Levine counts on and uses the general perceptions his audience should hold concerning Cleveland. In

being mainly a metropolitan area populated by many working class people, Cleveland is quite different from Princeton, and this fact is where evidence further supports interpreting the poem as an illustration of class struggle. Although Cleveland does have an upper class, the city more often conjures up images of factories and industry, thereby attaching it to strong working class associations. The car grill, then, takes on more meaning than simple description. It becomes a physical representation of the working class individual's struggle to appear high class, if not to break free from the lower class altogether. The narrator's argument that staying in the city "strikes [him] as an exercise in futility / greater even than saving your pennies to buy a Rolls" only adds to the low class associations attached to the environment, as it also comments on the absurdity of the dynamic with the sarcastic remark about saving. According to the narrator, a life in Cleveland is not really worth that much.

With connections to Cleveland and the suggestion of the lower class struggle to appear high class, references to Rolls Royces appear three more times in the poem. Each reference holds particular significance in Levine's depiction of the struggle between classes. At the end of the story about Howie, the narrator quietly posits, "If he'd invest in a Rolls, / even one with a Packard grill, he'd feel differently" (Levine, "Facts" 23-24). When viewed from a Marxist perspective, this observation is a concrete example of the Marx's concept that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (Marx, Preface 4). The narrator plainly argues that his friend would not feel as ashamed, or rather as high and mighty, as he does about "The Dinky" if he, in fact, were in the same position as the struggling working class of Cleveland. Because he lives in Princeton and experiences all of the upper class accoutrements associated with it, as opposed to the "exercise in futility" endured by many blue collar workers in Cleveland, the narrator's friend

is incapable of knowing the value of and appreciating the train for what it is. Instead of being petty and commenting on the name of the train, he would recognize and refer to it for its usefulness.

The statement's placement within the poem is also significant. The poem is eleven quatrains long, and the speaker's assertion that his friend would "feel differently" if his material circumstances were changed appears in the sixth stanza, the exact middle of the poem. The statement itself and the idea behind it are at the center as if they are the main point of the poem, with all else radiating around it. The structure of the poem supports Marx's theory of social beings. All that the narrator relates up to the statement of "feel[ing] differently" takes place outside his control, apart from him as an entity. He recounts the actions of the station attendant, the student, and his friend. He also describes the steps to change the car grills, and he judges living in Cleveland to be an "exercise in futility." However, starting with the assertion that is similar to Marx's theory, the narrator's words and descriptions turn inward, relating his own feelings and thoughts. The actual outside experiences he recounts, or his social circumstances, allow him to recognize and more fully understand the dynamic described by Marx. The narrator's experiences lead to his consciousness that is dominated by the recognition of the struggle between classes that he sees going on all around him.

Immediately after articulating the theory, having internalized the knowledge, the narrator tells his audience that he forgives "the student for lying," giving possible reasons for the pupil's actions. Readers begin to see that the progression of the struggle between the classes has not simply encroached upon the narrator, coming only as close as his friend Howie, but is a part of the narrator's own life. Confessing his own untruths, the speaker reveals the struggle within himself in the eighth stanza.

> There are two lies in the previous stanza. I'm small,
> each year I feel the bulk of me shrinking, becoming
> more frail and delicate. I get cold easily as though
> I lacked even the solidity to protect my own heart. (Levine, "Facts" 29-32)

Before reading the first line of this stanza, the reader is inclined to believe that the narrator did, in fact, let the student slide. He has no reason to believe otherwise. The first sentence of stanza six, however, changes any intimations of forgiveness. The narrator reveals that "There are two lies in the previous stanza." He then proceeds to discuss his size, disclosing that he is actually "small" and that "each year" he is "shrinking, becoming more frail and delicate." This description corrects the first lie of the narrator's depiction of himself in the preceding stanza: "I am an enormous man [. . .]" (Levine, "Facts" 27). This boast follows the narrator's "I don't blame the student for lying" (Levine, "Facts" 26) perhaps to impress him. What, then, is the other lie? Because the narrator mentions nothing else about his interaction with the student, the reader might assume that the narrator lies also about forgiving the student. This discovery leads to two further questions. Why does the narrator lie, and what are the implications of his lies within the poem?

The narrator's lies and his confession symbolize his own struggle that is analogous to the class struggle he portrays in the other incidents within the poem. The struggle for the narrator is not overtly one of classes, nor does it need to be. Like the actions of all the individuals he recalls, the act of lying by the narrator is an act of resistance. The narrator is fighting against the perceptions he believes others have of him. He implies that others view him as insensitive and unforgiving and as weak and insignificant. This is evident in the particular lies he tells. In order to display that he understands the situation, he rebels by saying he forgives the student, citing a

possible reason for the pupil's fabrication. Furthermore, he describes himself as the exact opposite of what he thinks others see in him in an effort to improve their opinions. This is no different than what the station attendant, the student, Howie, and the people who change their Packard grills do in order to improve others' impressions, and by implication, to improve their stations in life. The narrator's confession adds to the struggle in that he cannot let his own lies go without revealing them. He recognizes what he is doing, and struggling within himself, he feels he must own up to his actions.

After this illustration of his complicity in the situation, the narrator gives readers a sense of the overall struggle between the classes in which everyone participates. He does so by bringing together all of the elements counted on, alluded to, and referred to in the first half of the poem. Recounting a very particular moment in which each element has a part, including one of the two remaining Rolls Royce references, he says

> The coldest I've ever been was in Cleveland, Ohio.
> My host and hostess hated and loved each other
> by frantic turns. To escape I'd go on long walks
> in the yellowing snow as the evening winds raged.
>
> The citizens of Cleveland, Ohio, passed me sullenly,
> beknighted in their Rolls Royces, each in a halo
> of blue light sifting down from the abandoned
> filling stations of what once was a community. (Levine, "Facts" 33-40)

The picture is anything but promising. Recalling his stay in Cleveland, a stay that the speaker implies was nowhere near pleasant through the use of the word "coldest" in connection with it,

the narrator illustrates a scene of isolation and a scene of resignation to the "Facts" of the world. The first stanza just cited presents a picture of isolation due to separation as the narrator flees from the fighting couple, who could be arguing over problems rooted in and stemming from issues of class. The speaker is by himself "on long walks / in the yellowing snow as the evening winds raged." Getting away from the personal struggles of the people with whom he stays, the speaker sees the larger struggle between the classes and its effects all around him. Although he never explicitly refers to any tension, it is present nonetheless. The tension revolves around the image of the "Rolls Royces, each in a halo / of blue light." The "blue light sifting down from the abandoned / filling stations" alludes also to the flame emitted from the blow torches used to "reweld" the grills of the cars in the poem's second stanza. "The citizens of Cleveland, Ohio," that the speaker sees may be the lower class individuals "sullen[. . .] / [and] benighted in their Rolls Royces" strangely blessed, struggling to rise above their place by connecting themselves to a symbol of high society. However, the speaker may be referring to upper class individuals who drive real Rolls Royces with authentically manufactured grills. The real cars merely remind him of the altered cars and, thus, the "blue light" of the welding torch. The effect is the same for both interpretations. The cars act as twofold reminders or symbols of the struggle between and the separation of the classes. On one hand, the altered cars signify the lower class attempts to rise above its inferiority. On the other hand, the real cars stand for and advertise the upper class's superiority over the lower class. The fact that the narrator sees the "blue light sifting down from the abandoned / filling stations of what once was a community" reinforces the divisiveness represented by the symbols and realized by the struggle itself. The symbols and the struggle between the classes pit one class against another.

The final stanza of the poem conveys the narrator's resolution to the situation. The speaker adamantly announces his resolve resulting from what he has experienced with others and within himself and from what he has seen around him.

> I will never return to Cleveland or Princeton, not
>
> even to pay homage to Hart Crane's lonely tower
>
> or the glory days of John Berryman, whom I loved.
>
> I haven't the heart for it. Not even in your Rolls. (Levine, "Facts" 41-44)

By saying, "I haven't the heart for it. Not even in your Rolls" (44), the speaker suggests he doesn't have the fortitude (mental, or physical, or both) to visit either of the cities again, for the places constantly remind him of class struggle and how it destroys "communit[ies]." He wants no part of the struggle, for he knows the effects of it on others and on the self. Consequently, he refuses to perpetuate it.

The poem contains added significance when the reader identifies the speaker as Levine himself, which would not be totally out of the realm of possibility. If the speaker is Levine, the poem could be a recollection of his exit from Princeton after some time teaching there as a visiting writer. The fact that "[a] student" accompanies the speaker supports such a scenario. Naming Hart Crane and John Berryman further identifies the speaker with Levine, for Levine has expressed his affection for Crane's poetry, particularly "The Bridge," on various occasions. Also, at one time, Levine studied with Berryman, a man he clearly pays homage to in his essay "Mine Own John Berryman." Crane and Berryman also fit within the poem in another way. Crane was born not far from Cleveland in Garrettsville, Ohio, and Berryman once taught at Princeton. Reading the narrative as a recollection of Levine's then intensifies the sentiment expressed and more personally connects the feelings with Levine. The division of classes and

the pitting of one against another, which Levine sees in and associates with Princeton (a place of privilege if there ever were one) and Cleveland (a work-class industrial setting), negatively affect Levine to the extent that he "ha[sn't] the heart" to go to the places ever again. He wants nothing to do with the cities and all they represent and remind him of, even if they are significant landmarks within the historical landscape of the art form to which he dedicated his life with their ties to Hart and Crane, two poets whom Levine admires.

A close look at "The Fox," specifically the first five lines, also reveals Levine's awareness of and concern over the struggle between the classes. Speaking in the first person, more than likely as the author himself, the narrator plainly states

> I think I must have lived
> once before, not as a man or woman
> but as a small, quick fox pursued
> through fields of grass and grain
> by ladies and gentleman on horseback. (Levine, "The Fox" 1-5)

With these initial words, the narrator quickly sets up the opposition between the classes, identifying the one to which he belongs. He is descended from the lower class, even non-human or animal, fox chased by the upper class "ladies and gentleman on horseback" in a scene recalling the sport of fox hunting so popular and often associated with the gentry of England and early America. Describing himself, or rather the fox he thinks he might have been, as "small" enriches the symbolism when the reader realizes the largeness of those hunting him, which is added to by the fact that they are on horses. Literally, in his actual size, and figuratively, as the fox being hunted for sport, Levine's narrator is of a lower class than the others.

The poem, however, does not focus only on oppositions played out in the past. The action of the poem proceeds to current time, suggesting yet another clash between classes. Referring to his animal past and, by implication, his membership within the lower class, the narrator argues:

> It would explain
> my loathing for those on horseback
> in Central Park and how I can
> so easily curse them and challenge
> the men to fight [. . .]. (Levine, "The Fox" 9-16)

Continuing to connect his earlier life with his present one in the park, the speaker goes on to further describe his current actions. Because of his past incarnation, he is able to "stand / in the pathway shouting and refusing / to budge, feeling the dignity / of the small creature menaced / by the many and larger" (Levine, "The Fox" 27-31). The present situation described by the narrator is similar to that which he describes from his past, but at the same time it is different. As the descendent of the hunted fox, he still occupies a position in direct opposition to those on "horseback." Although the people on horseback could still be those of the upper class, perhaps leisurely riding through the park, they are more than likely policeman. As such, they suggest an entity even more powerful than the gentry depicted in the previous scene. They symbolize the state and all it represents. The narrator, as a man, then, holds his ground against a force from which his past life counterpart ran. It should be noted also that in the present situation of the poem, the struggle takes place on public land, a park, whereas in the previous situation the fox is running in his natural habitat taken over by others.

Having presented the struggle between the classes in the past and the present, the poem seemingly would depict it in the future. It does not, but it does allude to the idea. After

describing his tendency to hold his ground in the park, the narrator looks back again to his pre-human form. Reminiscing that "[he] must have been that unseen fox / whose breath sears the thick bushes / and whose eyes burn like opals / in the darkness," the speaker reminds readers of the fiery unspecified subjects waiting to revolt in "They Feed They Lion" (Levine, "The Fox" 32-35). More importantly, however, he firmly asserts his defiance of the upper class even in the past, identifying himself as one

> who humps
> and shits gleefully in the horsepath
> softened by moonlight and goes on
> 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 gentleman. (Levine, "The Fox" 35-47)

As the fox, he may not have openly stood up to the people on the horses, but as his final words reveal, he certainly did so subversively. By "hump[ing] and shit[ing] gleefully in the horsepath / softened by moonlight," he defiles their land. Furthermore, through the dignified way that he carries himself to the poem's end, he leaves no doubt in the readers mind as to his self-worth. It

is in this expression of self-worth that the narrator alludes to the future and the struggle between the classes that it holds. He ends, "proclaim[ing] / not ever ever ever / to mounted ladies and gentleman." The "ever ever ever" comes as the penultimate line of the poem, but it is also reverberates after the poem is completed through to its metaphorical future. Like ripples proceeding outward, the words project beyond the present of the poem. One can reasonably assume that the struggle does too.

Taken together the situations place Levine's poem in accordance with Marx's theory that "history" is always dictated by "class struggles" (Marx, *Manifesto* 55). In each situation, the narrator describes a conflict between the lower and upper classes, suggested in the first instance through the fox and the people on horses chasing it and in the second example through the narrator fighting with those same people on horses. The existence of the struggle in the future is not as plainly revealed as it is in the past and present, but it is suggested. From the past to the present both classes have evolved in their complexities. The fox has progressed to human form and the landed gentry have advanced to the entity of the state. Furthermore, the complexities of the struggles have developed. Instead of merely running away or subversively rebelling as in the past, the narrator actively fights against his oppressor. The struggle between classes, however, is only one part of the equation. The other is history itself. Levine's poem also portrays this. The fact that the narrative goes back in time and proceeds to the present lends the poem a sense of history. This sense of history is also projected to the future at the end of the poem. By incorporating the idea of class struggle through time, the piece literally plays out Marx's idea in poetic form. The contentious, class-conscious attitude and thoughts of the poem's speaker project back to the past only to pass through time and finally remain deeply rooted within the present day beliefs of and situations experienced by the very same speaker. In *The Communist*

Manifesto, Marx argues that history results from class struggles; in "The Fox," Levine portrays Marx's idea of class struggle through the history, through the very life (its past and present) of the poem's speaker.

In *Breath* (2004), Levine again brings his audience's attention to the struggle between classes through the first-person narrative of "Dust," which conveys the same working-class against upper-class attitude as "The Fox." Pitting the first-person speaker (more than likely Levine himself) against some overarching representation of those in society looking down on him and his kind, the poem opens with a description of an unnamed woman and her relation to the poem's speaker.

> A woman who thought she loved me once wrote
> a story in which "dust motes danced on and on."
> It may have had a narrative, I forget.
> It may have even had some characters,
> men and women or domestic animals
> going about their made-up lives. I remember
> the story won a prize, was published, brought
> her momentary attention and money
> enough to take me to lunch. (Levine, "Dust" II.1-9)

On the surface, such a beginning appears straight-forward enough, suggesting readers take the situation described at face value. However, knowing Levine's poetic tendencies and reading through to the poem's end where the speaker identifies himself as "a dirty Detroit Jew with bad manners" reveal the seemingly innocent start as something else (Levine, "Dust" II.20). Class

struggle which may not clearly make itself manifest until the speaker's revelation at the poem's end exists from the outset of Levine's words nonetheless.

The speaker establishes a dynamic of opposition in his opening description in three particular ways. First, the speaker and the woman do not connect with one another. The speaker plainly states "[the] woman [. . .] thought she loved [him]" (1), indicating that she did not love him. She was unable to form a substantial bond with the speaker, symbolically placing herself on unequal footing, even at odds, with the speaker. The speaker's attitude towards the woman's story also conveys a sense of opposition, underscoring a tension between the two. Although the speaker never explicitly states any feelings about the woman's writing, one senses that the speaker's thoughts on the subject are ambivalent at best. The quote from the woman's story that "'dust motes danced on and on'" seems trite and inconsequential, suggesting the speaker's assessment of the work, as if the words were the only memorable ones available to cite. That the speaker forgets the story's subject indicates its expendability and, by reasoning, its low quality. The condescending wording, "It may have even had some characters, / men and woman or domestic animals / going about their made-up lives," illustrates the speaker's judgment only lightly veiled. Why the woman is not able to create memorable characters is not apparent; however, keeping the theme of class struggle in mind, one could suggest that she is of a different class than her ordinary subjects, and consequently, she is unable to render even "made-up lives" effectively. The strongest example of how a sense of opposition is established between the speaker and the woman exists in the action of "Dust." The woman takes the speaker to lunch, clearly incorporating within the dynamic the most basic of elements associated with the struggle between classes: money. Even if only for a short period, the woman is of a higher class than the narrator because she can afford to buy him lunch.

The remaining lines of the poem describing the lunch itself intimate that the speaker is tired of beating-around-the-bush and wants to resoundingly condemn and belittle the woman for all that she represents. Exhibiting none of the reservation present within the first part of the poem, the second part expresses the speaker's views quite clearly, all the while playing out a struggle between the classes.

I hated

the way she ate, her clothed arms close to her sides,
one hand clutching a napkin with which
she feverishly dabbed at her lips as though
ingesting her chicken salad were an act
against God or some vast cosmic principle.
When I looked at my own right hand that held
a soggy golden french fry, I saw the nails
begrimed with grease, the yellow calluses
thick on my palm and cracked fingers, and felt
spectacularly pleased simply to be me,
a dirty Detroit Jew with bad manners. (Levine, "Dust" II.9-20)

The speaker's direct confession of hatred sets him in direct mental opposition to the woman and, by implication, to her class. However, the physical descriptions of the woman and speaker present the struggle between the classes even further. She is prim and proper, suggesting her upper-class station in life. The speaker's hands betray his working-class status. Describing the woman in juxtaposition to the speaker's hands emphasizes the privilege of the woman, as if she

never has had to do a hard day's work in her life, while also reiterating the lack of privilege experienced by the speaker.

The struggle between classes surfaces in another way when, in light of Levine's biography, one identifies the speaker as Levine himself. Since Levine worked in factories, is Jewish, and is from Detroit, the connection between the speaker of the poem and the real life author is arguable. The basic premise of the poem also supports a biographical interpretation of it. That a woman would send some of her own writing to Levine, like the woman in the poem does to the speaker, for evaluation is credible. Also, that Levine would express a disdain for the privileged upper-class as the speaker of the poem aligns perfectly with Levine's thoughts on the subject as expressed in interviews, essays, and additional poems. If a reader does interpret the speaker of the poem to be Levine, then, the poem itself, in its existence, becomes another expression of the struggle between the classes. Levine, "a dirty Detroit Jew with bad manners" and the author of the poem, stands in direct contrast to the general associations of the art form with the educated upper-class. Ironically, the poem delivers a working-class punch to the gut of the upper-class in that its real author uses a situation describing class differences to overcome those very differences historically. The working-class author of the poem is able to do exactly what the woman in his poem presumably has not yet done, which is forge a fifty-year, multi-award-winning career in literature, and specifically in poetry no less. Levine's success, and by implication the speaker's, is the reason the upper-class woman, probably just starting out in her own literary career, seeks his approval of her writing.

Marx's idea of the struggle between classes animates and informs Levine's poetry as the poems above demonstrate. Levine also incorporates the specific struggle between the classes upon which Marx bases his theory of dialectical materialism. Soon after the opening statement,

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (55), in section one of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx pinpoints the particular struggle playing itself out in modern society. Marx argues:

> Our epoch [. . .] has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. (Marx, *Manifesto* 56)

Explaining the transformation from the past to the present, he continues:

> The feudal system of industry, under which industrial production was monopolised [sic] by closed guilds, now no longer sufficed for the growing wants of the new markets. The manufacturing system took its place. The guild-masters were pushed on one side by the manufacturing middle class; division of labour between the different corporate guilds vanished in the face of division of labour in each single workshop.
>
> Meantime the markets kept ever growing, the demand ever rising. Even manufacture no longer sufficed. Thereupon, steam and machinery revolutionised [sic] industrial production. The place of manufacture was taken by the giant, Modern Industry, the place of the industrial middle class, by industrial millionaires, the leaders of whole industrial armies, the modern bourgeois.
>
> (Marx, *Manifesto* 56)

Here Marx essentially begins his explanation that class struggle particularly plays out between two groups he identifies as the bourgeoisie, those who control industry through ownership of the modes of production and capital, and the proletariat, those forced to do actual labor in return for

monetary payment.[21] Levine's poetry specifically goes so far as to portray the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Clear examples of the specific struggle put forth by Marx exist in Levine's poetry. Looking closely at specific poems in which the struggle is made evident provides further support and shows the degree to which Levine poetically portrays Marx's theory of the struggle between classes in his poetry. The first example of Levine's specific portrayal of the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat surfaces in "A Walk with Tom Jefferson" (1988). The poem recounts the demise of a community, its environment, its landscape, and its people ultimately due to the community's connection to and dependency on factory work. Recalling the fallout from when the factories that before the present action of the poem's narrative thrived were shut down, the narrator somberly states,

> this place was *finally* retired,
> the books thrown away
> when after the town exploded
> in '67 these houses
> were plundered for whatever
> they had. Some burned
> to the ground, some
> hung open, doorless, wide-eyed

[21] The general definitions for bourgeoisie and proletariat can be found in any number of sources on the subject. I have specifically incorporated the definitions given by "Engels's note to the English edition of 1888" of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* as given in note 7 on page 55 of the Norton Critical Edition of the document edited by Frederic L. Bender. Tom Bottomore specifically defines "bourgeoisie" in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* from Engels's note "as 'the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour'" (54). Bottomore continues, "The bourgeoisie, as in this sense the economically dominant class which also controls the state apparatus and cultural production [. . .], stands in opposition to, and in conflict with, the working class [. . .]," which is also known as the proletariat (54).

until hauled off

by the otherwise unemployable

citizens of the county [. . .]. (Levine, "A Walk" 46-56)

In the poem, the previously flourishing factories that once sustained the area's people have long since been shut down by their owners, leaving the people and the environment to suffer.[22] Tom Jefferson, the man with whom the narrator of the poem surveys the present condition of the area, conveys the one-time hopes and dreams of the people who once worked in the factories that are now gone. He says:

"We all come for $5

A day and we got this!"

His arms spread wide to

include block after block

of dumping grounds,

old couches and settees

burst open, the white innards

gone gray, cracked

and mangled chifforobes

that long ago gave up

[22] As several critics identify the description that "the town exploded / in '67" refers to the race riots in Detroit, Levine's home city, during that year. Consequently, the descriptions of destruction and desolation that follow in the poem clearly tie to the after effects of the riots. However, as the narrative makes evident, the businesses and factories that once thrived in the neighborhood never returned after the upheaval, leaving the area unable to recover economically. It is through this fact that the present interpretation of the poem is given. For further criticism on and explanation of the poem's particular ties to the race riots see, among others, Paul Mariani, "Keeping the Covenant: A Look at Philip Levine's *A Walk with Tom Jefferson*," *On the Poetry of Philip Levine*, Ed. Christopher Buckley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991); Robert Schultz, "From 'Passionate Virtuosity,'" *On the Poetry of Philip Levine*, Ed. Christopher Buckley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991); and Mark Jarman, "From 'The Pragmatic Imagination and the Secret of Poetry,'" *On the Poetry of Philip Levine*, Ed. Christopher Buckley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991). The above sources quote some of the same lines from the poem as the present analysis.

their secrets, yellow wooden

ice boxes yawning

at the sky, their breath

still fouled with years

of eating garlic sausage

and refried beans,

the shattered rib cages

of beds that couldn't hold

our ordinary serviceable dreams,

blue mattresses stained

in earnest, the cracked

toilet seats of genius,

whole market counters

that once contained the red meats

we couldn't get enough of,

burned out electric motors,

air conditioners

we suffocated, and over all

an arctic wind from Canada

which carries off

the final faint unseeable

spasm of the desire

to be human [. . .]. (Levine, "A Walk" 155-87)

In and of itself, the community's ties to the factories give some sense of the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The factories (the bourgeoisie's mode of production) continue to be productive at the expense of the community and its workers' lives (the proletariat) that are spent laboring in the buildings. Conversely, the community and the workers survive at the will of the factory owners. However, when the factory owners (the bourgeoisie) decide to leave the community, which because of their position in the economic construct of capitalism they have the power to do at will, the community and its people can only stay behind to fend for themselves. Unfortunately, without a source of support, the community usually dies as the one described in the poem. The struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat plays out quite specifically, however, at the poem's conclusion. Wistfully recalling better days when the community thrived because of the factory, the narrator ends

> The place was called Chevy
>
> Gear & Axle—
>
> it's gone now, gone to earth
>
> like so much here—
>
> so perhaps we actually made
>
> gears and axles
>
> for the millions of Chevies
>
> long dead or still to die.
>
> It said that, "Chevrolet
>
> Gear & Axle"
>
> right on the checks they paid
>
> us with, so I can

half-believe that's what we

were making way back then. (Levine, "A Walk" 575-588)

Marx's concept—of the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat as specifically defined by Engels—surfaces in the last six lines of the poem. For its own material gain, Chevrolet Gear & Axle "paid" a wage to the narrator and other workers to make a product, thus playing out the power relationship of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat. Without "the checks they [Chevrolet] paid" or without the work that earned the checks, the narrator and the community of workers suffer. Through this particular relationship readers see not just class struggle, the general concept behind Marx's economic/political theories, but more importantly, the specific struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat around which Marx's philosophical thought about modern society revolves.

A second poem in which Levine particularly brings to mind the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is "What Work Is" (1991). The poem portrays the specific struggle through the action it describes in two concrete ways. One surfaces through the speaker's brother's situation. After describing "stand[ing] in the rain in a long line / waiting at Ford Highland Park[,] / For Work[,]" the speaker mistakes another person for his brother (Levine, "What Work Is" 1-2). Realizing that the person he sees is, in fact, not his brother, the speaker subtly, yet specifically, brings to mind the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in his explanation as to why seeing his brother is not possible.

[The brother's] not beside [the speaker] or behind or

ahead because he's home trying to

sleep off a miserable night shift

at Cadillac so he can get up

> before noon to study his German.
>
> Works eight hours a night so he can sing
>
> Wagner, the opera [the speaker] hate[s] most,
>
> the worst music ever invented. (Levine, "What Work Is" 25-32)

The speaker's brother does not have complete control over his proletariat life, but instead, his job, and by extension, his bourgeoisie employers do. Aspiring to associate with the upper-class bourgeois art form of opera, the brother can pursue his education, another upper-class privilege, especially when it concerns something as impractical as the fine arts, only after he has spent most of his energy making Cadillacs (the automobiles often closely associated with the upper-class itself). In order to do what he wants to do in life, sing opera, the speaker's brother must first work for the bourgeoisie in a factory job to survive. He must take away from the precious time he has to recuperate for the next day's labor in order to do what he really wants in life. Presumably, if he were a member of the bourgeoisie, the brother would not have to worry about "trying to / sleep off a miserable night shift" or have to "get up / before noon to study" (Levine, "What Work Is" 26-27, 28-29). He would have the resources and the time to do what he wants when he wants.

As telling as the brother's situation is, the main and most direct way in which Levine depicts the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in "What Work Is" comes to light through the speaker's lack of control over his own life. Throughout the first half of the poem the speaker describes the act of "waiting [. . .] [f]or work" (Levine, "What Work Is" 2). Powerless, he spends his time "waiting, / shifting from one foot to another" (6-7). He talks of his "hours wasted waiting" (18). Then, in the exact middle of the poem, as if to emphasize the main or precipitating point of his tale, he reveals what all of the "waiting" is for:

> [. . .] the knowledge that somewhere ahead
> a man is waiting who will say, "No,
> we're not hiring today," for any
> reason he wants. (Levine, "What Work Is" 19-22)

In these words Levine explicitly reveals the struggle Marx refers to when he talks about the opposition between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The man at the head of the line who decides who works and when work is done represents the bourgeoisie. He controls the resources of production. On the other hand, the speaker of the poem, who "waits" in line, lacks such control. At the mercy of the man at the head of the line, the poem's speaker is a member of the proletariat. The interaction between the two individuals is an explicit representation, a playing out in poetic form, of the struggle between the two particular classes identified by Marx in his economic/political theory.

Conclusion

As the poems discussed above illustrate, Levine repeatedly concerns his poetry with Marx's theory of a struggle between classes as set forth in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. In some poems, "Barbie & Ken, Ken and Barbie" for instance, Levine relies mainly on tone. In other poems, including "The Fox," "Facts," and "Dust," Levine combines tone with descriptions of specific situations, actions, and events that play out or illustrate a tension between an upper- and a lower-class. Finally, Levine combines the previous two techniques with explicit references to Marx's idea of the bourgeoisie power over the proletariat. Levine's practice of this method most obviously exists in the poems "A Walk with Tom Jefferson" and "What Work Is." Through the use of all three techniques Levine is able not only to portray Marx's theory in poetic

form, but he is able also to reveal the various ways in which the theory is manifest both subtly and overtly.

Chapter 5

Levine's Portrayal of Man, Labor, and Alienation

A Marxist critical approach leads to valuable insight into Levine's poetry. As the previous chapter demonstrates, the theory of class struggle put forth by Marx and Engels supplies a strong source for the understanding of individual poems. Much of Levine's verse, including "Barbie & Ken, Ken & Barbie," "The Fox," "Facts," and "What Work Is," exemplifies the importance of class struggle within Levine's writing through the fact that the conflict plays a crucial role in the construct of the poems themselves. It is not only a point of reference for situations, actions, allusions, and symbols within the poems (and Levine's whole oeuvre), but it is also, fittingly enough, what the poems are specifically about.

As is the case with any accomplished poet's work, however, Levine's poetry illustrates far more than one topic or idea. In addition to portraying the struggle between the classes, Levine's poetry depicts and explores instances of and issues concerning the actual performance of labor. More specifically, Levine's verse focuses on factory labor, which the poet performed for about ten years prior to starting his literary career. Mining his past experiences in industrial America, Levine frequently populates his poems with factory workers laboring at their daily jobs and suffering the harsh effects of their toil. Levine's portraits of working class individuals and their daily lives open his verse to analyses from a Marxist perspective, for in his theoretical writings Marx also explores the connections between factory workers (the proletariat), the labor they perform, and the effects of their work. Marx centers his theories on the concepts generally known as "alienated labor" and "alienation." As Marx's theory on class struggle affords increased access to Levine's verse, the theorist's concepts of "alienation" and "alienated labor" allow for increased understanding of Levine's poetry. Conversely, by applying the theoretical

concept to the poetry, the reader can see that Levine poetically expresses Marx's ideas of "alienated labor" and "alienation" in the lives of the people populating his verse.[23]

Marx's theories on alienated labor and alienation have been a topic of study and discussion among modern-day cultural theorists and critics including Frederic Jameson and Raymond Williams.[24] From the ideas' exact definitions to their cultural and economic histories and their social ramifications, scholars have sought to further elucidate and explain just what Marx was getting at in the concepts. Current interpretations and complex dissections of the nineteenth-century theorist's original ideas shed light on any complete understanding of the topics. However, this study is not meant so much to identify and explore the intricacies of Marx's philosophy as it is to identify and discuss how Levine's poetry expresses and illustrates Marx's general ideas, ideas' basic tenants upon which a majority of individuals agree. For this reason, looking directly at Marx's writings on the subject with supplemental explanations will best serve for the purposes and scope of this study.

Marx explains and discusses his idea of alienated labor at various points throughout his extensive oeuvre. Making its first significant appearance in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and intermittently appearing in additional major works throughout Marx's writings published from 1843 to 1894 including *The German Ideology*, *Grundrisse*, *A*

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[23] The fact that Levine portrays the alienation experienced by modern-day industrial workers in his poetry has been pointed out by critics and scholar prior to this study. For further information, see Ray Olson, "*A Walk with Tom Jefferson*," rev. of *A Walk with Tom Jefferson*, by Philip Levine, *On the Poetry of Philip Levine: Stranger to Nothing*, ed. Christopher Buckley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) 244; Joseph Parisi, "*Selected Poems*," rev. of *Selected Poems* by Philip Levine, *On the Poetry of Philip Levine: Stranger to Nothing*, ed. Christopher Buckley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) 194; and others.

[24] For particular information related to the subject, see Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, Duke University Press, 1991. 131-153; and Williams, Raymond. *Keywords*: *A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983. 33-37. Also, for related information, see Eagleton, Terry. *Criticism and Ideology*: *A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*. London: Verso, 1978; Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1976; and Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, and *Capital*, the concept of alienation holds a central place in Marx's theories.[25] A precise definition of the concept is difficult to pin down, but the basics of the idea involve the connection between proletariat individuals and the separated and specialized work performed by them in a capitalistic economic system, the very type of individuals, work, and economic system about which Levine is writing in his poetry.

In order to reach a viable understanding of Marx's ideas as they apply to Levine's poetry, a working definition for alienated labor must be formed. Identifying and explaining some important terms in Marxist thought contribute to reaching just such a definition. Perhaps the two most obvious terms to define are "laborer" and "labor." For the purpose of this study, a laborer is anyone who works for an hourly wage (as opposed to a salary) at any of a given number of tasks created by the division of labor in the making of a product, particularly within a factory setting. A prime example of a laborer would be any individual working at a specified task on an assembly line. According to Duncan Foley in Bottomore's *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, "*labour* [is] the actual exercise of human productive powers to alter the [. . .] value of [. . .] commodities" (263). 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-Labour and Capital* Marx elucidates this disconnection in an example of a capitalist paying a weaver to make cloth. Marx writes,

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[25] For further discussions on and expressions of alienated labor by Marx, see: Marx, Karl with Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology*. 1846. *The German Ideology: Including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1998. 33-102; Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse: Foundations of The Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*. 1857-1858. Trans. Martin Nicolaus. London: Penguin Books, 1993. 450-458; Marx, Karl. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. 1859. Ed. and intro. Maurice Dobb. Trans. S.W. Ryazanskaya. New York: International Publishers, 1970. 84-85; and Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1. 1867. Trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books, 1990. 762-99.

> With a part of his existing wealth, of his capital, the capitalist buys the labour [. . .] 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 labour—the loom. After he has made these purchases, and among them belongs the labor [. . .] necessary to the production of the cloth, *he produces only with raw materials and instruments of labour belonging to him*. For our good weaver, too, is one of the instruments of labour, 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. (Marx 18-19)

As the example illustrates, the laborer has no real interest or connection to the product he helps produce. The product belongs to the capitalist, and he has the authority to do with it as he desires. Furthermore, as Marx points out, the laborer (the weaver in this case) becomes objectified and reduced to a mere thing in the process of making the cloth. From this dynamic, the idea of alienated labor arises. The labor performed by factory workers in capitalistic economic systems causes them to exist in a state of alienation, a state of alienation which reveals itself in a number of ways.

Marx argues that factory labor affects industrial workers in that it causes them to exist in a state of alienation from the very product they aid in constructing. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx states, "the worker is related to the *product of his labour* as to an *alien* object" (72). The alienation the worker experiences in relation to his product manifests itself variously. For the purpose of this study, it is not necessary to recount all of the different manifestations, but it is important to know that some of the manifestations Marx describes are evident in Levine's poetry. Levine, consciously or unconsciously, poetically

illustrates the alienation of the factory worker from his product in identifiable ways. How does a poet communicate that an individual is alienated from what he makes without stating the idea outright? One possible answer to this question exists in Levine's poetry. In *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*, Bertell Ollman interprets and comments on Marx's theory of worker/product alienation, noting "that [the worker] has no control over what becomes of his products, nor does he even know what becomes of them" (144). This general idea comes across in Levine's poetry.

Poems throughout Levine's career intimate instances in which workers are not completely cognizant 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 or not 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)

He is making alloy tubing. However, to what end one can only guess because the narrator 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, who is also the worker in this case, never identifies the final product, suggesting that he does not necessarily know what it is himself. Similarly, the narrator of "One" from *One for the Rose* (1981), describes a woman "that polishe[s] [. . .] chromed

tubes," yet he never discloses an interim or a final destination of the shiny metal pieces (Levine 24). 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. Finally, the speaker of "Fear and Fame," from the 1991 volume *What Work Is*, does not specify the purpose of "the new solutions from the great carboys / of acids lowered to [him] on ropes" (Levine 8-9). The fact that Levine never mentions or really even alludes to the final products in poems such as these portrays Marx's concept of the workers' alienation from their products. It suggests that the workers are not aware of the final entity they are helping to make. Consequently, they are limited in their own self-value, for they can only measure their value by units of production or by their wage.

Levine's poetry conveys Marx's theory concerning the alienation between a worker and his product in ways other than illustrating a worker's lack of knowledge about or connection to the product he is helping to make. Additional understanding of Marx's ideas bears this out. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx argues for another way in which the alienation between a worker and his product reveals itself. Expounding on his philosophy, Marx posits,

> [. . .] the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful the alien objective world becomes which he creates over-against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. [. . .] . Whatever the product of his labour is, he is not. Therefore the greater this product, the less is he himself. The *alienation* of the worker in his product means [. . .] that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a

> power of its own confronting him; it means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien. (72)

Conventional interpretations of this passage relate that the worker figuratively invests his life within the makeup of the product. The time and the physical energy taken away from the worker through the process of his labor metaphorically become the product itself, something outside of and physically separate from the corporeal body of the worker. Ironically, then, the worker's life, symbolically given to the product through being spent making it and through using the wages earned from making it, is owned or controlled by the entity itself.

Levine incorporates Marx's idea about the lives of workers transforming into the products the workers make through their labor in his poem "The Helmet" from the 1971 collection *Red Dust*. The poem describes two people who eat together at a diner after one of them, "[. . .] a woman / who'd been up late / making helmets" gets off work. Creating the scene, Levine draws specific attention to the woman factory worker's hands.

> There are white hands
> the color of steel,
> they have put their lives
> into steel,
> and if hands could lay down
> their lives these hands
> would be helmets. ("The Helmet" 21-27)

The resemblance of lines twenty-three and twenty-four to those of Marx is obvious and illustrates Levine, consciously or unconsciously, incorporating the alienation between a worker

and its product in his poetry. However, a careful analysis of the entire passage shows that Levine's use of the concept goes beyond just the two lines.

Almost echoing Marx's statement verbatim, the cited passage from the poem subtly portrays the cause and effect relationship between the action of a laborer putting her life into her product (the concept itself) and the result of such action (the alienation of the worker from her product). Readers know that the laborer has invested her life in the product she makes, for the narrator plainly states this fact. Through the description of the woman's hands, however, the speaker illustrates this progression both literally and metaphorically. The fact that the laborer's "white hands [are] / the color of steel" suggests a literal and figurative transformation (Levine 21-22). The woman's hands are changing from being a part of her body to being part of the manufactured product she is constructing. Changing colors literally because of the dirt and soot that covers them from the work she performs, the woman's hands take on characteristics of the steel they make. The metamorphosis occurring in the beginning of the passage's action suggests that anything but a state of alienation exists between the woman and the steel. She and the steel are becoming one. But the three lines after the echo of Marx's statement (lines 23 and 24) indicate that the opposite is really taking place. The narrator imagines that "if hands could lay down / their lives these hands / would be helmets" (Levine 25-27). In this, the speaker's imagination and more specifically the use of the conditional "if," Levine reveals the alienation between the worker and her product. First and foremost, the speaker's thoughts on the subject are not the reality of the worker's situation. Furthermore, the conditional wording of the thoughts themselves, reiterate the difference between the reality of the worker's life and the narrator's imagination. The "hands" cannot "lay down their lives" and thus "be helmets." The hands will always be separate from the helmets, and the helmets will always be alien to the hands

and the person to whom they are attached. Through this separation Levine alludes to and demonstrates Marx's idea of alienation between industrial workers and their products.

Providing further elucidation of the concept of alienation, Marx lists a variety of specific ways in which the process bears itself out. Toward the end of the portion of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* in which he discusses alienation between the worker and his product, Marx states,

> The laws of political economy express the estrangement of the worker in his object thus: the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more values he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes; the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker; the more civilized his object, the more barbarous becomes the worker; the mightier labour becomes, the more powerless becomes the worker; the more ingenious labour becomes, the duller the worker and the more he becomes nature's bondsman. (73)

These relationships clearly are closely related to Marx's earlier argument that the more the worker invests his life in the product he manufactures, "the less is he himself" (*Economic* 72) in that each connection reveals itself as inverse proportions. In order for one part of the relationship to increase, the other part must decrease, and vice versa. Although the poet does not portray every instance described by Marx, Levine does illustrate in his poetry the basic inverse proportionality through which Marx believes the concept of alienation between the worker and his product makes itself apparent.

One of the most important poems concerning this inverse relationship is "An Abandoned Factory, Detroit" from the 1963 collection *On the Edge*. One of Levine's earliest poems dealing

with factories and labor, the poem presents a dismal scene, describing an old, empty, and obsolete factory:

> The gates are chained, the barbed-wire fencing stands,
> An iron authority against the snow
> And this grey monument to common sense
> Resists the weather. Fears of idle hands,
> Of protest, men in league, and of the slow
> Corrosion of their minds, still charge this fence.
>
> Beyond, through broken windows one can see
> Where the great presses paused between their strokes
> And thus remain, in air suspended, caught
> In the sure margin of eternity.
> The cast-iron wheels have stopped; one counts the spokes
> Which movement blurred, the struts inertia fought,
>
> And estimates the loss of human power,
> Experienced and slow, the loss of years,
> The gradual decay of dignity. (Levine 1-15)

The poem is important here because it reveals that Marx's concept of alienation between the worker and his product is present in Levine's verse from the very beginning of the poet's career. Additionally, the poem contains statements that directly correspond to Marx's words. Similar to Marx's belief that the alienation between workers and their products manifests itself by causing

laborers to become "duller," the narrator implies that the factory of the poem and, by extension, the products that are its ultimate reason for existence have caused "the slow / [c]orrosion of [men's] minds" (Levine, "An Abandoned Factory" 5-6). Also, akin to Marx's argument that "the mightier labour becomes, the more powerless becomes the worker" (Marx, *Economic* 73) is the narrator's suggestion that the toil in the factory specifically has led to "the loss of human power," "the loss of years," and "The gradual decay of dignity" (Levine 13-15). Levine's narrator never overtly describes the relationship between the factory and its products and the results of both on the workers as being inversely proportional. However, combining the narrator's statements that recall Marx's words with the specific descriptions of the factory and its workers illustrates the equation.

> Men lived within [the] foundries, hour by hour;
>
> Nothing they forged outlived the rusted gears
>
> Which might have served to grind their eulogy. (Levine 16-18)

While creating/constructing the product of the factory, the workers simultaneously destroyed themselves through the expenditure of their labor.

The narrator means to convey that the factory has existed for some time and that it embodies some sort of strength and power over the individuals that had worked within it. The solidity with which he describes the building suggests the edifice's superiority. The factory "stands, / [as] an iron authority" (2). A "grey monument," it "[r]esists the weather" (3-4). The building and, again by extension, the goods which are its ultimate reason for being are physical embodiments of the "mightier" and "more ingenious labour" referred to by Marx.

Another poem that serves as an example in which Levine illustrates the inverse proportionality through which a worker is alienated from his product is "Sweet Will." In the

poem, from the 1985 collection of the same name, the narrator recalls a specific night from his past as he toiled "on [. . .] the concrete, oily floor / of Detroit Transmission" (Levine 3-4). He begins the memory by focusing on a coworker who passes out from inebriation at work "where your Cadillac cars get manufactured," using himself and other factory laborers and their indifference to his plight as support (Levine 42). As the speaker reveals, "the others / told [him] that every Friday [Stash] drank /more than he could hold and fell / and he wasn't any dumber for it [. . .]" (Levine 7-8). Applying Marx's theory to this situation, the reader can infer the inverse equation playing itself out. Stash is building Cadillac cars, arguably a "more civilized" form of the average automobile produced in America. The Cadillac is perhaps even the epitome of the most civilized "object" of its kind. In accordance with Marx's inverse relations, then, building the car presumably leads Stash be "more barbarous," as is evident in his drunkenness on the job and the fact that he calls the others "Nigger, Kike, Hunky, River Rat" (Levine, "Sweet Will" 31). Having emptied (spent) his labor (capital) making the cars, Stash attempts to "refill" himself with alcohol (additional capital) only to spend it on hatred. Put in the simplest terms Stash's work building fine cars depletes his civility until he has none left.

Some disagreement with this interpretation may arise because the narrator describes neither himself nor the other coworkers as falling into the same pattern as Stash. They all work in the same factory. However, Stash is the only individual portrayed as coarse and crude. Why doesn't the narrator portray everyone as being negatively affected by the labor they perform? The actions of the other coworkers allow for reasonable explanations that would still substantiate the above interpretation. The main characters of the poem are the speaker and Stash. The other coworkers are minor players. Consequently, the narrator does not concern himself so much with describing them or their actions. They are not his subject. The actions of Stash and the

narrator's reflection on those actions are the poet's subject, and as such, they are the ones with whom the reader really need be concerned. Additionally, Levine cannot have the speaker describe everybody that works in the factory. The simple fact remains that not everyone in the factory is like Stash. Marx's theory is just that: a theory. It is not fact, so it makes sense that not everyone would be affected the same way as Stash.

The narrator's actions also have reasonable explanations. First of all, the narrator presumably has not been working at the factory for as long as Stash has. "[T]he others / told [him] that every Friday [Stash] drank / more than he could hold [. . .]" (7-9). If he had been working at the factory for any period of time, the narrator would not have to give Stash's past history of drinking and passing out secondhand. He would have been able to witness everything himself and tell the reader about Stash directly. As it is, the narrator tells readers about Stash based on what his coworkers tell him about the man. Because the narrator has not been working at the factory for as long as Stash has, the narrator has not had the time to be affected in the same way as Stash. Consequently, he is not yet as uncivilized as Stash.

The length of time that the narrator presumably has been working in the factory provides ample justification for why the speaker does not act as Marx's theory would seem to dictate. However, there is another explanation as to why the narrator does not act like Stash. Using the first person point of view, the narrator of the poem could be Levine himself. Critics often note that many of Levine's poems are autobiographical. Here, there are parallels between the narrator of the poem and Levine. Like the narrator, Levine worked at Detroit Transmission. Also, the estimated time between when the poem's main event occurs and when Levine wrote (and published) the piece corresponds to the time in the poet's real life when he was doing factory work. The narrator says that the event concerning Stash took place "34 years ago" (2).

Subtracting the number of years from when the poem was composed (sometime between 1981 and 1984) dates the actual year of the event around 1950. In 1950 Levine was twenty-two years, and he was still doing industrial labor for a living. Although this evidence does not conclusively prove that Levine is the narrator of the poem, it does provide strong support for the reading.

With Levine as the actual narrator of the piece, the narrator's actions make even more sense than they do if they were accounted for simply by the length of time the narrator has been working in the factory. The majority of Stash's life arguably consists of "Working "on [. . .] the concrete, oily floor / of Detroit Transmission" (3-4). Readers know for a fact, however, that Levine's life consisted of more. Most importantly, it included education and an interest in poetry. Having such outside influences and the possibilities it afforded the future poet, in a sense, protected Levine from suffering the same end as Stash. Although Levine did not know it at the time that the event was taking place, his existence was not defined solely by the factory work that he was doing. This analysis is supported through the flashback framework of the poem itself. Levine, the successful poet of the present in which the piece has been composed and published, looks back on the event. He now is able to see Stash's situation and his own for what they really were and to illustrate them accordingly.

Alienation from Self

According to Marx, the alienation of the worker from his product is not the only result of industrial labor. He also argues that factory labor alienates the worker from his very self, plainly stating that "[it] estranges man's own body from him" (*Economic* 77). Within the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx explains this claim through his discussion concerning the effects of "estranged labor" on the "species life" of man (or the worker). Marx argues that human survival is inextricably dependent on its direct interaction with the natural world to the

point that the human body and nature essentially are two halves of a single whole entity. Because factory labor splits the two halves apart, it causes nature and man to exist in states separate from each other. The separation leads man to view nature outside of himself and, therefore, as a foreign unit from his own body. When Marx writes about the alienation of the worker from himself due to "estranged labor," he is, in fact, referring to this dynamic: man's separation from himself as played out in his disconnection from nature and his natural activities.

The detrimental effects of man's separation from his bond to the natural world (whether it be illustrative of Marx's belief on the subject or not) appears in Levine's poetry. Time and again, the poet presents images of contrast between nature and industrial environments, suggesting specific associations with each. He does this most frequently through his narrators' positive descriptions of nature and negative presentations of industrialism. Levine's narrators characteristically relate internal peace and harmony with nature and mostly discord and frustration with settings of industrialism. In this sense, the poet illustrates Marx's ideas to the point that industrial labor is neither natural to nor essential for mankind's basic survival. However, Levine's illustrations primarily rely on the reader's abilities to make the connections, and therefore lose some of their power. As a result, the fact that Levine incorporates Marx's idea that "estranged labor" leads to the alienation of the worker from himself is often overlooked. This is not to say that the poet does not present the relationship in more conspicuous ways, for he does.

One of the overt ways in which Levine illustrates the alienation of the worker from himself is through various 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 Lonnie (the poem's main character) 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. (Levine 28-32)

This passage clearly presents Marx's concept in poetic form. The narrator begins by stating a question that he tells the audience 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 to the point that he could, in fact, 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. Instead of presenting a situation that never happens (the abstract), the narrator has the hands execute actions apart from the physicality and consciousness of the worker (the concrete). The independent-like actions of the hands, consequently, end the poem, leaving readers with the image of the subject's body parts as separate, or alienated, from the body. The body is separated from itself, or, in other words, the worker is alienated from himself.

In the poem "The Everlasting Sunday," which follows directly after "Commanding Elephants" in *Not This Pig* (1968), Levine again presents a situation in which the poem's main character, the piece's actual narrator, is alienated from himself. As if to imply that the alienation

is due to “estranged labor,” the poem, like the one before it, starts with a description of the industrial work performed by the laborer. It describes the actions of the narrator on the factory job in relative detail and transitions to a stanza in which the speaker again awakens, this time in the middle of the night, to take stock of his body. Perhaps looking in a mirror, but seeing himself straight-on nonetheless, the narrator reflects on what he sees.

> Naked, my hard arms
> are thin as a girl’s,
> my body’s hairs tipped
> with frost. This house,
> this ark of sleeping men,
> bobs in silence. I feel
> my fingers curl
> but not in anger,
> the floor warms,
> my eyes fill with light.
> When was I young? (Levine 35-45)

The narrator, like the subject of “Commanding Elephants,” experiences his moment of revelation only after he is away from his job. This is important because, along with the implications of the title “The Everlasting Sunday,” the epiphany emphasizes that factory laborers only can begin to know themselves outside of their working environments. It is no coincidence that the speaker of “The Everlasting Sunday” specifically states that he is able to “feel / [his] fingers curl,” that “the floor warms,” and that “[his] eyes fill with light” at the time that he does. Levine illustrates the alienation of the narrator from his own body in that the speaker experiences sensations when he

is removed from the numbing effects of industrial labor. However, as if to suggest that even away from factory labor workers are still alienated from their selves, Levine's narrator asks himself the question that he does. In reality, he still does not know himself entirely.

Alienation from Man/Others

In discussing the concept of estranged labor in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx puts forth a third essential effect of the phenomena. Conveyed through a complex progression of interrelated ideas, the third concept is that "one man is estranged [alienated] from the other, as each of them is from man's essential nature" (77). In other words, man exists in a state of alienation from other men (or all mankind) as a result of industrial labor. 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). Put another way, within the framework of estranged labor, the industrial worker's position dictates how he constructs his environment. The material conditions of his life as a worker, alienated from his product and from himself, force him to view that which is outside himself, foremost of all being other people, as alien. Marx explains this dynamic when he writes,

> The *alien* being, to whom labour and the produce of labour belongs, in whose service labour is done and for whose benefit the produce of labour is provided, can only be man himself.
>
> If the product of labour does not belong to the worker, it confronts him as an alien power, this can only be because it belongs to some *other man than the worker*. If the worker's activity is a torment to him, to another it must be *delight*

> and his life's joy. Not the gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power.
>
> We must bear in mind the above-state proposition that man's relation to himself only becomes *objective* and *real* for him through his relation to the other man. Thus, if the product of his labour, his labour *objectified*, is for him an *alien*, hostile, powerful object independent of him, then his position towards it is such that some one else is master of this object, someone who is alien, hostile, powerful, and independent of him. If his own activity is to him an unfree activity, then he is treating it as activity performed in the service, under the dominion, the coercion and the yoke of another man. (*Economic* 78)

For Marx, industrial wage labor separates men and puts them at odds with each other through its very existence.

Not surprisingly, the alienation of one man from another due to wage labor most elementally plays itself out in the working relationships within the realm of industrialism. Frederic L. Bender stresses Marx's attention to this fact in his opening remarks concerning the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Referring specifically to man's alienation from man, what Bender specifically designates as "*alienated interpersonal relations*" due to wage labor, he writes,

> Everyone is forced by the competitive market to adopt a selfish outlook, to become indifferent or even antagonistic toward everyone else in the work world. The capitalist's relation to his employees is one of hierarchical domination characterized by the constant attempt to maximize his gain at their expense (Marx's "exploitation"). Capitalists are themselves caught in deadly competition

> with one another. Likewise, workers compete with one another for relatively scarce jobs, which tend to reduce their wages. Thus everyone, capitalist and proletarian, finds himself trapped in an economic struggle against everyone else.
>
> (Bender 21-22)

As expected, with regard to the factory environment and the economic bonds that hold it together, no one is impervious to the effects of estranged labor. The work mandated and perpetuated by the system alienates/opposes laborers from/to themselves, from/to their superiors, and from/to each other. It affects industrial owners and bosses in much the same way.

Although all of the instances of alienation mentioned above do not necessarily play out in Levine's poetry, the dynamics described do exist. Perhaps to no real surprise, one particular form of alienation between men that Levine illustrates is that between industrial workers and their superiors. References and hints at the general dissatisfaction of laborers and their separation from those above them abound in Levine's poetry. The narrator who loads and unloads train cars in "And the Trains Go On" (*The Names of the Lost* 1976) suggests the inability of others (among them his superiors) to connect with him or understand his suffering when he plainly states "our tears mean nothing" after describing manual work and intimating a general feeling of isolation. Similarly, the speaker of "You Can Have It" (*7 Years from Somewhere* 1979) does not overtly explain his alienation from the bourgeois, but he implies it nonetheless. Speaking to the world in general, but certainly meaning to be heard by bourgeois oppressors everywhere, he indicates a state of alienation in his obstinate refusal of the results from his and his brother's hard work for others. Expressing that he does not want what those he has been working for presumably desire, he flatly states,

> I give you back 1948.

I give you all the years from then

to the coming one. Give me back the moon

with its frail light falling across a face.

Give me back my young brother, hard

and furious, with wide shoulders and a curse

for God and burning eyes that look upon

all creation and say, You can have it. (Levine 37-44)

The narrator's words suggest that he is alienated from his superiors in their palpable rejection of the life and the world his and his brother's labors have created.

This rejection of a life forged out of doing work for the gain of others again surfaces in the poem "One" (*One for the Rose* 1981) as the laboring female subject suddenly exclaims, "'It's shit. / That's just what it is, shit.'" (19-20). The woman's expression of her feelings of alienation from her superiors is not as developed as in "You Can Have It." However, she is at work doing her job when suddenly she stops and cries out. She can only be referring to her work and her life resulting from it, for the narrator gives no hint as to anything that could otherwise be the impetus for the outburst. What her superiors, the bourgeois factory owners, see as a positive – the woman's manual labor that results in the products they profit from – the woman designates as "shit," thereby revealing her alienation and opposition to those very individuals.

The above poems—"And the Trains Go On," "You Can Have It," and "One"—are only a few examples of how Levine incorporates the alienation of workers from their superiors in his writing. To be sure, several other instances exist in Levine's oeuvre that indirectly point out some sort of opposition between workers and their employers. However, the poet does not

always just hint at or merely suggest a state of alienation between workers and their superiors, relying on readers to make the connections themselves. Levine's presentation of the dynamic is fairly explicit at times.

Levine plainly illustrates the workers' separation from their superiors in the early part of his career as well as in the later stages of it, suggesting the importance of the topic throughout the poet's writing. In the relatively early work "Detroit Grease Shop Poem" (*They Feed They Lion* 1972), Levine presents the alienation inherent within the boss/worker relationships of industrial America in a manner that clearly goes beyond suggestion. The specific wording of the poem spells out the dynamic at work between the laborers and their bosses. The narrator of the poem robotically recounts how he and his coworkers put certain automotive parts together. He says the parts "have their orders / and their commands as he / has his" (9-11). Summing up his and his coworkers' situation, he reveals, "We're all there to count / and be counted [. . .]" (16-17). The narrator's words strongly suggest the workers' estrangement from their superiors. The same words describe both the workers and what they are making, and both entities receive similar treatment. The word "orders" operates on two levels. On one level, the parts being made are "ordered" or organized in a meaningful fashion by the workers, and the workers are "ordered" or directed to make them. On a third level, the parts are requested from customers in or by orders, which are given to the workers to be filled. Additionally, both the workers and the products they make must follow "commands," and they are both things to "be counted." In the eyes of the industrial owners and bosses, the laborers essentially are just additional parts of the overall product that they are making.

Levine's most explicit rendering of the alienation that workers feel in relation to their superiors and vice-versa exists in the poem "What Work Is" (1991). Coming some twenty years

after “Detroit Grease Shop Poem” and at a time in the writer’s career when he arguably has fully developed his craft, the poem epitomizes the alienation between the two groups. In the piece, a collection of prospective laborers, including the poem’s narrator, stands in direct contrast to one individual who for all intent and purposes represents the bourgeoisie. The narrator opens the poem, “We stand in the rain in a long line / waiting at Ford Highland Park. For Work” (1-2). It is bad enough that the people are in the rain. However, being “in a long line” standing and doing nothing while waiting to be, in a sense, used like the machines and parts the laborers will themselves use if they are lucky enough to obtain work adds to the humility and exploitative tone of the scene. The individuals waiting in line are parts, not people, to be utilized or discarded at will. This fact and the inability of the hiring person to empathize with the prospective workers that is evident in his “waiting” at the front of the line to “say, ‘No, / we’re not hiring today,’ for any / reason he wants” further reveal the extent of the alienation between the workers and their superiors (20-22). The workers and the hiring person are clearly separated from each other. The workers are in the rain. The person who will hire them presumably is not. The workers are looking for employment. In making decisions as to who works and who does not, the hiring official is already employed. The workers do not have power. The hiring man does. By specifying that the hiring person can base his decision randomly on “any / reason he wants,” Levine illustrates the extent of the alienation between workers and their superiors.

As Bender points out, this alienation—of workers from their superiors—is a common way in which industrial labor alienates men from each other. After all, the dynamic playing itself out in such instances makes sense. Each group of individuals operates under different circumstances that are fundamentally at odds. The laborers have their goals: to make as much money as they can from the work that they perform. The laborers’ superiors, and more

specifically the bourgeois, have their goals: to make as much money as they can from the laborers' work also. The separation occurs in the fact that each group attempts to reach its goal at the expense of the other group. The workers want to do as little work as possible while making the most money they can from that work. On the other hand, the owners of the means of production want to make as much money as they can by getting their workers to perform as much labor as they can at the lowest wage they will accept. Consequently the two groups exist in a state of alienation from each other.

Another manifestation of the alienation between men in general due to industrialism, which Bender briefly touches on when he discusses the competition between workers for employment, is that between the laborers themselves. Levine also illustrates this within his poetry as the would-be-workers stand in line, subtly, though consciously, competing to be chosen. However, he does not do so in a way that Bender's interpretation of Marx would help readers readily identify it. No obvious examples of the alienation among workers from job competition exist in Levine's verse. Instead, one finds in Levine's writing instances where Peter Osborne's explanation of Marx in *How to Read Marx* provides a strong reference point for recognizing such illustrations. Osborne writes,

> [. . .] Marx reasoned that we are [. . .] alienated from each other. This is a direct result of our alienation (as workers) from our activity, since this activity is the activity of social production. In being alienated from our activity, we are alienated from our own sociality, that is, from all the possible ways of freely being with others that are opened up by participation in a labouring collective. We become merely private individuals, whose contribution to social production is experienced merely as a 'means of individual existence.' (Osborne 54-55)

Osborne's explanation makes it obvious that the alienation among laborers, and actually among the majority of people in industrial society, is specifically due to the inherently anti-social nature and effects of the work performed. Levine's illustrations of alienation among workers in his poetry do not take the form of overt competition between workers—for employment openings or for any other individual or personal gain for that matter. Instead, alienation among laborers manifests itself most commonly through the act of communication, or lack thereof, within the factory setting. Through these very anti-social qualities and effects, Levine creates a sense of alienation among workers in his poetry.

Although Levine recognizes that "the place [the general factory setting] has a language" (28) as he does in "Coming Close" (1991), only one of hundreds of poems, he often emphasizes his characters' difficulties communicating with each other. This most obvious form of alienation surfaces throughout Levine's work. "[M]en / 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), a poem published in the middle of Levine's career, the narrator tells "of the great forge room / where the burning metals pressed [him] / down into a silence deeper than still water" (40-2). Even as late as the fourth decade of Levine's career, the absence of communication within the working environment still concerns him. In "Growth" (*What Work Is* 1991), the narrator confesses,

> In the soap factory where I worked
> when I was fourteen, I spoke to
> no one and only one man spoke
> to me and then to command me

to wheel the little cars of damp chips

into the ovens. (Levine 1-6)

One additional example in which Levine presents the alienation between laborers in a factory setting occurs in the 1999 poem "Drum" (*The Mercy*). However, instead of explicitly telling about the difficulties the workers have communicating, as the narrators of the previously mentioned poems do, the speaker of "Drum" takes the motif a step further. He simply describes a day at work, beginning to end, for him and his coworkers. He mentions nothing about communication between the characters. Many more examples in which Levine's narrators or characters do not or simply cannot communicate with each other exist. To list them would only belabor the point.

That Levine expresses alienation between industrial laborers due to the isolating effects of their working environment should really come as no surprise. It is something he refers to outside of his poetry. Time and again, he refers to the isolation he, himself, felt while working in industrial America. His nonfiction work and interviews attest to it. In the personal essay "The Poet in New York in Detroit," Levine recalls a visit to a Ford automobile plant, where he "found the same world [he] knew at Chevy, black and white and gray. [He] heard the same deafening roar, and saw the same men, stunted and isolated by their labors" (143). There is no mistaking what Levine is getting at in his description. The "deafening roar" does not allow the men to talk or basically communicate with each other, thereby forcing them to be alienated or isolated from one another. The isolating effect of the noise on the factory floor surfaces again when, in a personal correspondence, Levine specifically recounts his own industrial employment. As if to leave no doubt, he plainly states, "The worst aspect of factory work was the noise which cut me off from almost everyone I worked with, the absence of any sense that what I was doing was

worthwhile, the absence of any precise sense of what I was doing [. . .]" (Levine, Letter). Clearly, Marx's alienation among industrial workers that results from their very labor and working environment is not some topic Levine chose on a whim. It is a condition he experienced all-too-well himself, and one about which, in all likelihood, he consciously chooses to inform others.

Levine's presentation of Marx's theory 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. Levine also goes outside of the specific environment of the factory floor to show the alienating effects factory work has 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 not only reiterates an adherence to Marx's ideas, but he also intensifies his condemnation of the entire dynamic playing itself out.

One particular poem that shows the alienation factory workers experience in relation to their families is, or course, "What Work Is," which I have already discussed in this chapter. Revisiting the poem, nonetheless, provides a good starting point for illustrating the point at hand. Standing in line in the rain, waiting for work, the narrator addresses the reader, or perhaps himself, implying the effects industrial labor has on an individual. Although the wording of the poem with its second person pronoun "you" allows for the possibility that the speaker is addressing the reader, he could just as well be speaking to himself. Whether speaking to the reader or to himself, the effect is similar. 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. However, this time 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 mere feet from him, but he is even incapable of conveying the easiest expression of love and familial bonding to him.

This separation in regards to the fraternal bond is even reiterated in the physical space that the two brothers supposedly 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 [. . .]" (Levine 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 home. Presumably then, when the narrator is at home, his brother is at work, and the cycle continues on ad infinitum. 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.

Physical separation and, by implication, an emotional and social disconnection within the family unit also play out in the earlier poem "Look" (1985), collected in *Sweet Will*. The basic action of the poem involves a young man waking in the morning to a presumably empty house because his mother is just ending her nightshift work somewhere else. Describing the morning experienced by the main character, Levine begins the poem:

> The low-built houses of the poor
> were all around him, and it
> was dawn now, and he was more
> awake than not. So it is
> a young man begins his life.
> Someone, probably his brother
> has quietly closed the front
> door, and he feels a sudden gust
> of cold air and opens his eyes.
> Through the uncurtained window
> the great factory sulks in gray

light, there where his mother
must be finishing the night,
her arms crossed and immersed
in the deep, milky washbasin,
those long and slender arms
that seem to him as hard
and drawn as a man's, and
now she would be smiling
with one eye closed and blurred
by the first cigarette in hours. (1-21)

Although the speaker refers to the possibility of the man's brother being the one who closes the door that wakes the main character, the sibling relationship clearly is not the focus of the poem. However, a sense of alienation between the brothers, like that expressed in "What Work Is" comes through in the simple account nonetheless. Consequently, looking closely at the sibling relationship makes sense. The narrator specifically states that the main character's sibling "probably [. . .] / has quietly closed the front door" (6-7). The statement's validity is unclear, leaving room for interpretation. If he is not the one who closed the door, who is it? The fact that the main character cannot name the person suggests a sense of disconnectedness with, and thus a state of alienation from, his own family. The main character, though, is not telling the story; the speaker of the poem is an outsider, which could account for the confusion as to who closed the door. The speaker is unfamiliar with the family and thus assumes who closed the door. Even if the person who closed the door was the main character's brother, the speaker's account would still provide possibilities for a state of separation or alienation between the two men. A

reasonable assumption as to why the brother shut the door is that he was going to work himself. However, the speaker mentions nothing more about the brother throughout the entire poem. After he leaves the house, the brother plays no part in the main character's day, the fact alone of which suggests how distant the siblings are in that they lead separate lives after leaving a house in which probably the majority of their time together is spent sleeping to rest and gain strength for their next day's work. Whatever the situation is with the brother and the main character, the speaker's descriptions allow for interpreting the relationship between the two as one characterized by alienation because of work. If the brother is the one who closed the door that wakes the main character, the alienation is evident in the lack of interaction between the two in the morning before they go to work and in the speaker's omission of the brother throughout the rest of the poem, which suggests how little the part the brother plays in the main character's life. Furthermore, if, in fact, the speaker is wrong in that the main character's brother was not the one who shut the door, hinting that there may not have even been a brother to begin with, then the disconnection is apparent in that there was no one for the main character to connect with in the first place.

As much as the relationship between the brothers may contribute to understanding Levine's portrayal of alienation due to factory labor, the poem's primary subject is the relationship between the main character and his mother. The connection/disconnection between mother and son illustrates a state of alienation between human beings due to factory work even more so than the brothers' relation. As the lines cited above reveal, Levine portrays the cause-and-effect relationship between factory work and the alienated state of the mother and son early in the poem. The first image the main character sees as "he feels a sudden gust / of cold air and opens his eyes" lays the groundwork that precipitates the actions that follow and thus is arguably

the reason why the mother and son interact the way they do. The main character does not see a person (his brother?), the sun, or anything else possessing positive qualities. Instead, he sees only that "the great factory sulks in gray / light, there where his mother / must be finishing the night [. . .]" (11-13). Exuding a dismal tone, the setting begets the lives of the mother and son. Furthermore, the situation Levine sets forth from the start illustrates the alienation between the two people. The mother is at work away from her son as he sleeps. The physical separation is apparent, suggesting a state of alienation in itself; however, the circumstances expose an alienation of another kind, that particularly between a mother and son. The mother is away from her child, albeit an adult one as is revealed a few lines later, specifically at night when mothers normally watch over and protect their children. In Levine's poem, the mother symbolically neglects her maternal duties by leaving her son unprotected in the dark of night, illustrating a state of alienation between the two. The way in which the speaker describes how the son views the mother clearly adds to the feeling of alienation between them. Referring to the son's thoughts about his mother, the speaker says,

> her arms crossed and immersed
> in the deep, milky washbasin,
> those long and slender arms
> that seem to him as hard
> and drawn as a man's [. . .] . (14-18)

The work the mother (a woman) performs causes her own son to see her as a man, something other than what she, naturally and within their relationship, is.

As the poem continues, the speaker describes how, on the particular day about which he is telling, the mother and her son will encounter each other taking their respective paths from and to work. The speaker states,

> They will pass, mother and son,
> on the street, and he will hold
> her straight, taut body for
> a moment and smell the grease
> in her hair and touch her lips
> with his, and today he will not
> wonder why the tears start and
> stall in her eyes and in his.
> Today for the first time in
> his life he will let his hands
> stray across her padded back
> and shoulders, feeling them
> give and then hold, and he will
> not say one word, not *mother*
> or *Ruth* or *goodbye*. (28-42)

Through this simple, brief encounter, Levine most concretely conveys the alienation between the mother and son. The speaker specifically states that the two "will pass [. . .] / on the street" (28-29), continuing that "he will hold / her straight, taut body for a moment and smell the grease / in her hair [. . .]" (29-32). With lives dictated by work (presumably in the same factory since they cross each others' paths to and from their jobs), the mother and son can only interact for a single

"moment." Their physical and, by implication, their actual mother/son connection lasts for only a single instant. Acting as a reminder of the factory and how much it pervades the world of the two, the fact that the son first "smell[s] the grease / in her hair" when he holds her merely emphasizes the reason why their lives are the way they are. Continuing to describe the encounter, the speaker then specifies that the particular event is happening "Today for the first time in / [the son's] life [. . .]" (36-37) and that as the son holds his mother for this "first time," "he will / not say one word, not *mother* / or *Ruth* or *goodbye*" (40-42). Evidently, the encounter is the first time in all the times the mother and son have seen each other on the way to and from work that the son has been able to see his mother as a real person, perhaps even as his mother. It is the first time that he is able to have an actual connection with her as one human being to another. The factory work that controls their lives (the very work which keeps them apart from each other, but also ironically brings them together if only for "a moment") alienates them from one another to such a degree that this is the first time the son can even express some sort of emotion toward his mother. Even then he only holds her, saying nothing, perhaps because nothing needs to be said or, more likely, because there is nothing that can be said, for it as if they are strangers meeting for the first time.

Another interpretation of "Look" exists that allows for the poem to act as a demonstration of the alienation experienced by a mother and son because of factory labor. The poem can work as an allegory for the main character's entry into the harsh realities associated with being a member of the working class. No longer a boy to be awakened by his mother when she arrives home from working the nightshift, but instead an adult in his own right, the "young man begins his life" as a factory worker himself (Levine 5). On the particular day described by the narrator (The first day the main character must go to work in a factory, suggested in that the embrace

between mother and son happens “for the first time in / his life” (36-37) later in the poem?), the main character, “more / awake than not” (3-4) in the morning, lies restlessly awaiting the inevitable, when “he feels a sudden gust / of cold air” – possibly the realization of what the rest of his life is to be – “and opens his eyes” (8-9). He awakens not to the warmth, comfort, and safety of his mother, but to the knowledge that, like his mother and maybe “his brother, / [who have] quietly closed the [. . .] / door” on the idealism of his youth by going to work before him, he will become a non-feeling laborer or machine part. “Through the uncurtained window / the great factory sulks in gray / light” (10-12) as an omen of his future. Toward the end of the poem, the meeting between the mother and son in which “tears start and / stall in her eyes and in his” (34-35) then takes on a meaning alternate to the one above. Instead of crying because the meeting is the first time they can connect with one another, the two are crying because they know what the future holds for them. The mother cries for her son who will go on to live a life like her own, and the son cries for his mother with whose suffering he can more readily identify. The meeting, thus, symbolically becomes the last time the two will be able to connect with one another.

The alienation experienced between mother and child is definitely one way that Levine portrays how factory labor alienates workers from their fellow men/women in society. Combining such alienation as in “Look” with the alienation factory work brings about in sibling relationships as exemplified in “What Work Is” indicates Levine’s overall illustration of the depth of the alienation from men that it can so greatly affect the family unit, perhaps the strongest connection in any human’s life. However, Levine shows not only alienation between siblings and between mother and child in his poetry. He also demonstrates the alienation experienced in other familial relationships.

In the poem “Words” from the 1979 collection *7 Years from Somewhere*, Levine particularly portrays the alienating effects manual labor precipitates in the relationship between a father and son. As in “Look,” “Words” revolves around the family unit, but instead of writing “Words” from a third person point-of-view, Levine writes the poem from the father’s first person point-of-view, providing immediate access to the alienating effects of work within the family unit. The unfiltered first-person perspective of “Words” allows readers to experience exactly what the character the father particularly feels about working life. Casually giving his account of the situation because what follows is nothing new, having happened many times before, the speaker of “Words” states,

> 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 picture Levine paints here is similar to that of "Look," with some interesting differences. In both poems work (particularly factory or manual work as the speaker later reveals) separates two family members. However, in "Words," the parent does not work but stays at home. This simple variation suggests that parents are not the only ones forced to separate from the family because of work. Children are just as susceptible as their elders. The speed with which the son leaves the house, as indicated by the fact that "he is late and doesn't / have time for coffee / or *hello*," compares with the shutting of the door in "Look." However, more importantly, the son cannot say anything, not even *hello*, to his father, the fact which parallels the inability of the mother and son in "Look" to communicate with words. These similarities and subtle differences suggest that the alienation from factory work affecting families itself works in an identifiable pattern.

As noticeable and as telling as are the similarities/differences between the beginnings and general situations of "Look" and "Words," an even more crucial point of comparison/contrast exists between the poems that suggests much about Levine's verse. In "Look," the son appears to attempt to overcome the alienation caused by factory work by physically embracing his mother, yet he does not, or is unable to, verbalize his emotions or the desire he must feel to connect. This same desire to connect and the need to verbalize the connection appear in "Words." Continuing the poem, the speaker says,

Lately I've been
running by day,
drinking by night,
as though first to build
a man and then destroy
him—this for
three months, and
I don't find it foolish
—a man almost 50
who still knows so
little of why he's
alive and would turn
away from answers,
turn to the blankness
that follows my nights
or the pounding of
the breath, the sweat
oiling every part
of me, running
even from my hair. (20-39)

These words, the second stanza of the poem, seem to take the poem in a different direction, or at the very least do not appear to elucidate the first stanza to any real degree. The speaker essentially describes what is going on in his life at the time of the action of the poem. However,

the descriptions in the second stanza of the poem suggest that Levine or someone who has experienced what the author has experienced in life is the speaker of the poem. The speaker admits to being "—a man almost 50" (29). Appearing in the 1979 collection *7 Years from Somewhere*, "Words" would have been written around a year or two before appearing in the volume, dating the writing of the poem at about 1978 or 1977 when Levine would have been almost fifty years old, having been born in 1928. Specific descriptions also suggest that the speaker comes from a past like Levine's, involving factory work of some kind. The speaker uses factory imagery, particularly "the pounding of / the breath, the sweat / oiling every part / of [him], running / even from [his] hair" (35-39), to describe himself.

If Levine or someone like him who has worked in a factory is the speaker, "Words" makes sense in comparison/contrast with "Look" as far as both portraying the alienating effect of work within the family unit, and particularly as far as family members not being able to verbally connect with each other. The inability to connect or communicate with each other comes through in the final two stanzas of the poem. Expressing a clear sense of alienation from the self, other people, and the natural environment (all of which figure in Marx's theory of alienating labor), the speaker reveals,

> 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)

Employing the entire third stanza, the speaker says what amounts to his own thoughts since he is not speaking in the second person directly to the reader. Consequently, what he conveys represents his thoughts that he cannot express to his son or, as he reveals later, to his own wife.

The final stanza then brings the entire poem in line with the interpretation that "Words," like "Look," portrays the inability of family members (particularly a father and son in this case)

to connect through verbal communication as a result of being alienated from one another due to factory work. The poem's speaker ends his account describing a typical evening when his son returns from work:

> Tonight my son
> will come home, his
> hands swollen and cracked,
> his face gray with
> exhaustion. He will
> slump before his dinner
> and eat. He will say
> nothing of how much
> it costs to be 18
> and tear some small
> living for yourself
> with only your two hands.
> My wife will say nothing
> of the helplessness
> she feels seeing her
> men rocking on
> their separate seas.
> We are three people
> bowing our heads to
> all she has given us,

to bread and wine and meat.

The windows have gone

dark, but the room is

quiet in yellow light.

Nothing needs to be said. (65-89)

With "his / hands swollen and cracked, / his face gray with exhaustion," the younger man returns from work defeated (66-69). Such physical descriptions combined with the fact that "He will / slump before his dinner / and eat" easily suggest that man performs alienating labor (69-71). The fact that the three members of the family (father, son, and mother) eat in silence illustrates once again the alienating effects of such labor.

The final sentence of the poem arguably suggests a connection between the family members in that each individual's situation is understood by another in the family, hence "Nothing needs to be said" (89). To wit, the father knows how the son feels and vice versa probably because, like the son, the father has done alienating factory work of his own. The father expresses some familiarity with the son's situation in knowing particularly what the son will refrain from talking about at dinner, as if he has had the same frustrations himself in life particularly because of the work he performs. The husband also knows how his wife feels, just as he knows she knows how he feels, for he says,

My wife will say nothing

of the helplessness

she feels seeing her

men rocking on

their separate seas. (77-81)

Viewing the effects of alienating labor in the men's lives, the mother specifically recognizes "their separate[ness]." However, knowing how each other feels is not the point. The family cannot find solace in an immediate connection with one another, be it verbal or physical. They merely go about their lives together in space, yet apart as far as emotional, verbal, and physical contact is concerned.

Another poem similar to "Words," "Look," and "What Work Is" in portraying the alienating effects of factory work on the family unit, and yet different in key aspects, is "The Wife of the Foundry Worker." Contained in the 1971 collection *Red Dust* and the earliest of the four poems, "The Wife of the Foundry Worker" exclusively concerns the relationship between a husband and wife. The poem's main character obviously works in a factory as the title indicates. Additionally, as in the case with the other poems, the effects of such work on the individual are negative. Levine begins,

> All night long
> behind goggles he sees blood
> he screams blood, a sea
> of boiling blood, he sweats
> in shirt sweater shirt
> and slaps his red palms and sings
> Fuck em Fuck em and feels great. (1-7)

Presumably cramped within a factory for a comparatively long time, "All night long" (1), and with a distorted view from "behind goggles" of surroundings the foundry worker embodies and exudes violent anger and resorts to expressions of frustration. The progression of the first stanza

clearly suggests this dynamic, particularly with the descriptions of reaction following immediately after the statements of situation.

After providing further details about the foundry worker's day, the beginning of the second stanza directs the foundry worker's anger and frustration presumably towards a specific individual: his wife. Through the voice of a third-person speaker that eerily morphs into the main character's own words and thus his own frustration expressed, Levine writes,

> At 4
> go out in the falling dark
> to Tim's and beer and eat
> potato sandwiches. He says Fuck em
> he'll kill her, she'll cry blood
> Fuck he'll show her
> up against the wall, Jesus
> in the garbage she can damn well eat it
> under streetcars
> in a blaze of silver come
> and Sundays. (8-18)

Obviously away from work, the main character "go[es] [. . .] / to Tim's," perhaps a friend or maybe a bar, "[to drink] beer and eat / potato sandwiches" (9-11). The meal is meager at best, if not in quantity then definitely in quality. In an attempt to ease the feelings of anger and frustration, perhaps the foundry worker drinks too much. At any rate, the speaker reveals that because of frustration, or maybe because of too much alcohol, or even because of both being mixed so soon after leaving work, the main character's anger controls his emotions. In fact, the

foundry worker's anger is so intense that it leads him to associate his violence with "Sunday," traditionally a holy day of rest.

As the poem continues, the anger and frustration eases within the foundry worker. However, what leads the emotions to diminish is unclear. Levine writes,

> At 8
>
> go home in grudging dawn
>
> he blesses silence, and snow crystals
>
> his hair a moment
>
> blessing him. Up the stairs
>
> and toward the doorknob his hands
>
> are luminous. (19-25)

The first stanza states that the action being described takes place "All night long" (1). The specification that the action taking place occurs "behind goggles" (2) combined with the use of the third person pronoun "he," presumably referring to the foundry worker, suggests that the first stanza is, in fact, describing the experience of the foundry worker as he labors in the present tense at his job. The second stanza starts "At 4 / [. . .] out in the falling dark" (8-9), indicating that the action is taking place in the late afternoon, the usual time people get off work. However, if the main character works "All night long" as the first stanza states, then the second stanza's beginning has to be describing a time completely separate from that of stanza one.

A close look at the complete structure of the poem, in fact, reveals that the two parts of the poem are not so much describing different times as they are variations of time. Taking place "At 8 / [. . .] in grudging dawn" (19-20), the middle of stanza two appears to make the timing of the poem even more confusing, for it seems to pick up where the end of stanza one left off, with

the foundry worker getting off work at eight in the morning and going home. Going from line 7 to line 19 creates a continuous progression of time. Assuming that the poem's main character works a normal eight hour shift, as most people do, and "At 8 / [he] go[es] home in grudging dawn," he must start work at 12:00 midnight, working the nightshift "All night long" (1). The beginning of stanza two, which takes place "At 4 / [. . .] in the falling dark" (8-9), thus describes the time before the main character goes to work. He has some eight hours before he should be on the job at 12:00 midnight. The time of the poem is merely rearranged, with the first stanza (1-7) describing the main character's work on the job, the beginning of the second stanza (8-18) describing the main character time just before he goes to work on the nightshift, and the third stanza describing when he gets off work and goes home in the morning. The distorted arrangement of time then begs the question, "Why does Levine structure the poem as he does?"

A close look at the poem's three sections of time, how they are structured, and what they specifically describe provides a reasonable interpretation for this aspect of the poem. The first section (1-7) intimates the foundry worker's anger and frustration on the job. The second section (8-18) also expresses the foundry worker's anger and frustration, but it does so at a time when the character is about to go to work. The two sections fit together in that they are describing times when the foundry worker most immediately feels the anxiety precipitated by his job, when he is at work and when he is about to go to work. Section three (18-25) describes the time during an average day when the main character's work least controls his life. It is the time when he is least alienated from himself as an individual. Admittedly, he does "go home in grudging dawn" (20), indicating some remnant of frustration (in the knowledge that, although the next shift does not start for another sixteen hours, another working day is at hand or in the realization that he has to sleep his day away in order to rest for his next shift). However, away from work

for the time being, “he blesses silence, and snow crystals / his hair a moment / blessing him” (21-23). Furthermore, because he no longer has to see his environment from “behind goggles” (2), “his hands / are luminous” (24-25), suggesting he is able to see them in a clear light for what they really are.

The above explanation of the poem’s structure and content certainly aids in interpreting the poem as a whole. However, when combined with the poem’s final lines, it specifically allows for the interpretation of “The Wife of the Foundry Worker,” as an illustration of the alienation experienced between a husband and wife due to factory labor. Describing the situation when the laborer returns home, as if recounting the character’s own immediate thoughts as he stands alone in his residence, Levine writes:

> No one’s here.
>
> No one was. No pale kimono, rose
> and quilted, no flattened mouse,
> no cat, no bitch, no yellowed bar
> of laundry soap, no rag-on draining voice
> of daytime radio, no one
> no one no one masterfully
> looking up from frying bread. (26-33)

Listing the non-existence of several objects associated with women specifically to call to mind the absence of the/a wife, Levine makes the laborer’s aloneness and alienation clear. “[T]he foundry worker[‘s] wife” has presumably left the man because of his job or what it has essentially made him into – a bitter, angry brute. The labor of the worker creates a violence

within him, as suggested in lines 12 through 18, that causes him to objectify women and to drive them away.

Conclusion

Just as Levine poetically illustrates Marx's relatively general idea of class struggle throughout his verse, he also demonstrates the more specific theories of Marx concerning the alienation factory workers experience as a result, more or less, of such tensions. Through these representations of class struggle and worker alienation, Levine essentially provides readers with a view of the core of Marx's argument. Levine's presentation of class struggle, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, affords an outsider's view of what may be seen happening on the surface of the situations and to the characters about which the poet writes. On the other hand, Levine's descriptions of the workers and the alienation they suffer as a result of their labors afford an insider's, microcosmic-like view of the effects that class struggles within Capitalism produce. The numerous means by which Levine portrays these concepts throughout his oeuvre arguably provide a strong focal point for the study of Levine's poetry. It is only through the thorough exploration and understanding of the concepts and their presentation that readers, critics, and scholars alike can reach an estimation of Levine's achievement in regard to Marx's theories that are inexorably woven within the poetry.

Chapter Six

Conclusions

Responding to a question concerning the Marxist themes present within his poetry, Levine makes his opinions on the subject indisputable. He unequivocally states,

> The idea of a Socialist state is something that has enormous appeal to me. I don't honestly think that there's ever been one. The Soviet Union was a totalitarian nightmare that like other totalitarian countries made nightmares out of their neighbors. 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. (Personal Interview)

Statements like these and the Marxist elements running throughout his oeuvre as illustrated in this study's analysis of his poems' characters, settings, attitudes, situations, and action leave readers with little doubt as to one of the most prominent components comprising his poetics. However, as noted before, the connection between Levine's poetry and Marxism comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with the man's verse. Critics and scholars alike have been recognizing and calling attention to Marxist points of interest in Levine's poetry, most commonly demonstrated through a presentation of working-class America, from early in the poet's career in the 1960s to his most recent publications in 2007.

As chapter one from this study points out, however, critics and scholars alike have largely neglected to rigorously investigate Levine's poetry in general. This is not to say that no in-depth

work has been done on Levine's verse, but rather that nowhere near enough has been undertaken, especially in light of the work scholars have done on poets similar to Levine. Comparing the amount of scholarly work done on Levine's poetry and the amount of work done on the poetry of Galway Kinnell, a contemporary of Levine's, plainly illustrates this point.

Considering Levine's career, accolades, and influence makes the lack of scholarly work on his poetry all the more egregious. Having been writing and publishing in six decades now (1950s to 2007), Levine has produced much work to study and analyze. Numbering in the hundreds, his poems have appeared in the most prestigious outlets in which poetry has ever been published. These include, but are not limited to, *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*. Levine's books number seventeen and counting, which supports the fact that the reading public values his poetry. After all, publishers would not keep printing books by authors no one reads, especially if it is poetry. Levine has received nearly every major prize for poetry including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the American Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Ruth Lily Prize, which all attest to the quality of his work, if not in its own right, then most definitely in context of all poetry being written in the country. Perhaps, the only major prizes he has yet to win are the Bollingen Prize for Poetry and the Nobel Prize for Literature, both of which are still legitimate possibilities. The fact that Levine has published as much as he has for as long as he has and has received the recognition that he has is testament to his acceptance and estimation from critics and the general public alike.

Scholars should also give more attention to Levine and his poetry than they previously have given because of his influence on the direction poetry has taken within the last fifty years. As a teacher Levine has mentored an impressive number of young writers who have gone on to forge successful literary careers (in poetry or otherwise) in their own rights. These include, but

are not limited to, Gary Soto, Roberta Spear, Greg Pape, Victor Martinez, Ernesto Trejo, David St. John, Lawson Fusao Inada, Christopher Buckley, and Larry Levis. Each has won his/her share of awards and honors from the poetic community. Levine has also affected the writing of award-winning poets he did not teach. The effect was never more apparent than at his seventy-fifth birthday celebration at Vanderbilt University in 2004. With peers C. G. Hanzlicek, Peter Everwine, Galway Kinnell, Edward Hirsch, and Gerald Stern among the attendees, the event was filled with stories and examples of just how often and to what extent Levine has aided and inspired generations of poets. As if personal testimony were not enough, award-winning and well-respected poets, most notably Kate Daniels and Gerald Stern, have published poems particularly dedicated to Levine. Even when all of the people who speak highly of Levine are long since dead and buried, evidence of his importance and influence will surely live on.

Proceeding from the widely recognized fact that elements of work in modern industrial America saturate Levine's poetry, section two presents the verse in historical context, particularly regarding the poet's presentation of working-class individuals and the act of labor itself. More specifically, chapter two illustrates that Levine's body of work in verse operates within a tradition dating as far back as ancient Greece. Similar examples of individuals performing work appear in poetry by Homer and by Levine. Likewise, just as Virgil uses work as the main theme of his *Georgics*, thus basing an entire collection of poems on the idea, so too does Levine in his collection of poems *What Work Is*. Examples of Levine's poetry as far as its references to and uses of work are concerned also act in corresponding ways to poetry from many of the defined periods in literature, including the Old English, Middle English, Renaissance, English Romantic, Victorian, American Colonial, and American Romantic periods. Some of the authors from the periods whose writing Levine's poetry resembles are Langland,

Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley, Bradstreet, Taylor, and Whitman. In one sense, because Levine's poetry compares to that of several authors before him, Levine has done nothing all that new in poetry, English or American. Countless poets before him have written as he has about work. Before Levine wrote about factory work and working-class people in particular, the subjects were not entirely unheard of in verse.

Levine's unique place and his importance in American poetry reside in the range of his attention to the subject. He writes about work in general and specifically. Working-class people are minor characters in some of his poems, and they are the main characters in other poems. The poems variously concern women, men, mothers, fathers, sons, brothers, uncles, and friends who labor in industry and the relationships they share. Levine constructs his poems from a third person point-of-view, with narrators outside of the American industrial experience looking in, and he writes from the first person point-of-view as a member of the working class. He writes also in second person, directly addressing his audience as they read his poems about industrialism and working-class people. Levine's poems accomplish a variety of ends: they quietly instill a sense of pride in the labor and in the workers themselves; they blatantly rail against the injustice and back-breaking toll of industrial work; and they act as a record of factory labor and working-class people in twentieth-century America. Levine's importance is in the fact that his poetry documents more facets of working-class industrial life in America than any other author's poetry before him.

Employing working-class elements and themes about labor, Levine invites a Marxist interpretation of his poetry. At the most basic level, Marxist theory provides a useful tool in analyzing Levine's verse, for Levine repeatedly makes use of Marx's theory of class struggle as the driving force behind history. From Levine's first book, *On the Edge*, in which "An

Abandoned Factory, Detroit" calls attention to such conflict by presenting a contrast between the demise of a group of industrial workers and the obstinate existence of the very building in which the individuals toiled, to his most recent collection, *Breath*, in which "Dust" plays out a personal conflict between the classes illustrated through the contrast between the raw nature of the poem's lower-class narrator and the refined behavior of his upper-class lunch partner, the theme of class struggle surfaces throughout Levine's poetry. In fact, numerous times class conflict and related issues appear, and the various ways in which the poet directly presents or subtly alludes to the subject allows for the argument that the struggle between the classes is an integral, if not driving, force throughout Levine's oeuvre. In a very real sense, the struggle between the classes is the impetus behind the history of Levine's poetry.

Marx's theory of alienation resulting from the division of labor in a factory setting also figures prominently in Levine's poetry. Close examination of the poems, from early in Levine's career to some of his recent publications, reveals that the instances of worker alienation portrayed by Levine correspond to the various types of alienation specifically identified by Marx. For example, Marx's alienation of workers from their products comes across in poems like "An Abandoned Factory, Detroit," "One," and "Fear and Fame," published in three different decades. Other poems, including "The Everlasting Sunday" and "Commanding Elephants," both from *Not This Pig*, illustrate Marx's concept of man's alienation from himself as a result of factory labor. The theory of alienation from Marx that Levine most thoroughly presents through his poetry, however, is that which occurs between fellow men. Many of Levine's poems, including "And the Trains Go On," "You Can Have It," "One," "Detroit Grease Shop Poem," "What Work Is," "Coming Close," "Dawn, 1952," "Drum," "Look," "Words," and "The Wife of the Foundry Worker," illustrate one person's inability to communicate or connect with another as a result of

factory work in some way. Appearing throughout Levine's canon in such great number, the poems clearly show, if not definitively prove, that alienation resulting from factory labor, specifically alienation between fellow men as put forth by Marx, is a particularly important element to Levine's poetics.

Chapter one demonstrates that critics and scholars need to look more closely at Levine's poetry in general. The remaining chapters of this dissertation make obvious, much like many other writings on Levine's poetry, that working-class elements open to Marxist interpretations abound in the verse. This dissertation only touches the surface of an area that covers much ground. Critics and scholars should continue to more fully investigate Levine's poetry in regard to its presentation of the working class and its various Marxist interpretations. Looking in depth at what Levine is most recognized and praised for in his poetry can lead to a better understanding of Levine's poetry in general, for from and around such origins, everything else that Levine incorporates in his poetry emanates and revolves respectively.

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Appendix A

A Sample of Anthologies in which Levine's Poems Appear

***Anthology of Modern American Poetry*. Ed. Cary Nelson. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.**

"The Horse"	925-926
"Animals Are Passing From Our Lives"	926-927
"Belle Isle, 1949"	927
"They Feed They Lion"	927-928
"Francisco, I'll Bring You Red Carnations"	928-929
"Fear and Fame"	931-932
"On the Meeting of Garcia Lorca and Hart Crane"	932-933

***The Columbia Anthology of American Poetry*. Ed. Jay Parini. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.**

"Animals Are Passing from Our Lives"	649
"Angel Butcher"	650-651
"Later Still"	651-652
"Belle Isle, 1949"	652
"Snow"	652-3
"Belief"	653-6

***Contemporary American Poetry*. Ed. A. Poulin, Jr. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980.**

"Animals Are Passing from Our Lives"	283
"To A Child Trapped in a Barber Shop"	284
"Coming Home"	285
"Angel Butcher"	285
"They Feed They Lion"	287
"Zaydee"	288
"Starlight"	289
"Ashes"	290
"You Can Have It"	291
"Let Me Begin Again"	292

***Contemporary American Poetry*. Ed. A. Poulin, Jr. 6th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996.**

"Animals Are Passing from Our Lives"	359
"To a Child Trapped in a Barber Shop"	359
"Coming Home"	360
"Starlight"	361
"You Can Have It"	362
"The House"	363
"What Work Is"	364
"Among Children"	365
"The Simple Truth"	366

***The Harper Single Volume American Literature*. Gen. ed. Donald McQuade, Donald, et. al. 3rd ed. New York: Longman, 1999.**

"Coming Home"	2471
"They Feed They Lion"	2472
"You Can Have It"	2472

***Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*. Ed. Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Kathryn Hellerstein.New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.**

"Zaydee"	852
"On a Drawing by Flavio"	853
"Sources"	854
"The Sweetness of Bobby Hefka"	855

***Modern Poems: A Norton Introduction*. 2nd ed. Ed. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989.**

"To a Child Trapped in a Barbershop"	689
"They Feed They Lion"	689
"The Life Ahead"	690
"Genius"	691

***The New Oxford Book of American Verse*. Ed. Richard Ellmann. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.**

"Above It All"	996-997
"To a Child Trapped in a Barber Shop"	997
"The Lost Angel"	998
"Animals are Passing from our Lives"	998-999

"Salami"	999-1001
"They Feed They Lion"	1001-1002
"The Way Down"	1002-1003

***The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym, et. al. 3rd ed. Vol. 2. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989.**

"Animals Are Passing from Our Lives"	2678
"Detroit Grease Shop Poem"	2678
"They Feed They Lion"	2679
"On the Murder of Lieutenant Jose del Castillo by the Falangist Bravo Martinez, July 12, 1936"	2680
"Starlight"	2681
"The Fox"	2682
"Winter Words"	2683

***The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym, et. al. 4th ed. Vol. 2. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994.**

"Animals Are Passing from Our Lives"	2690
"Detroit Grease Shop Poem"	2690
"They Feed They Lion"	2691
"On the Murder of Lieutenant Jose del Castillo by the Falangist Bravo Martinez, July 12, 1936"	2692
"Starlight"	2693
"Winter Words"	2694
"Fear and Fame"	2696

***The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Gen. ed. Nina Baym. 5th ed. Vol. 2. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995.**

"Animals Are Passing from Our Lives"	2697
"Detroit Grease Shop Poem"	2698
"They Feed They Lion"	2699
"On the Murder of Lieutenant Jose del Castillo by the Falangist Bravo Martinez, July 12, 1936"	2700
"Starlight"	2701
"Fear and Fame"	2701
"The Simple Truth"	2702

***The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Gen. ed. Nina Baym 6th ed. Vol. E. (American Literature since 1945). New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003.**

"Animals Are Passing from Our Lives"	2928
"Detroit Grease Shop Poem"	2929
"They Feed They Lion"	2930
"Starlight"	2930
"Fear and Fame"	2931
"The Simple Truth"	2932

***The Norton Anthology of Modern and American Poetry*. Ed. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. 3rd ed. Vol. 2. *Contemporary Poetry*. New York: London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003.**

"They Feed They Lion"	423-424
"Belle Isle, 1949"	424
"You Can Have It"	424-425
"Drum"	426

***The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. Ed. Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973.**

"To a Child Trapped in a Barber Shop"	1184
"The Midget"	1184
"Animals Are Passing from Our Lives"	1186
"They Feed They Lion"	1187

***The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. Ed. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988.**

"To a Child Trapped in a Barbershop"	1293
"Red Dust"	1294
"They Feed They Lion"	1295
"The Life Ahead"	1296
"Genius"	1297

***The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy. 5th ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005.**

"They Feed They Lion"	1761

"You Can Have It"	1761-1763
"The Simple Truth"	1763

***The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy. Shorter 5th ed. New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005.**

"You Can Have It"	1094-5
"The Simple Truth"	1096

***The Oxford Book of American Poetry*. Ed. David Lehman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.**

"Baby Villon"	849-850
"They Feed They Lion"	850
"You Can Have It"	851-852
"The Return"	852-853

***Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Ed. Dana Gioia, David Mason, and Meg Schoerke. New York: McGraw Hill, 2004.**

"On the Edge"	822
"Animals are Passing from Our Lives"	822
"To a Child Trapped in a Barber Shop"	823
"They Feed They Lion"	824
"You Can Have It"	825

***The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*. Ed. J. D. McClatchy. 2nd ed. Newly Rev. and Expanded. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.**

"The Horse"	311-312
"They Feed They Lion"	313
"Belle Isle, 1949"	314
"You Can Have It"	314-316
"Rain Downriver"	316-317
"Sweet Will"	317-319

Appendix B
Philip Levine Interview
with Jeff Rumiano
May 4, 2004
National Arts Club
New York, New York

The interview, or conversation, that follows took place for about an hour and a half in the morning following the previous evening's reading by Levine (with other poets and fiction writers including Billy Collins and Alice Hoffman) in honor of the literary journal Five Points published through the English department at Georgia State University. Agreeing to meet with me at the request of his fellow poet David Bottoms, Levine arrived about ten minutes early for our 9:00 AM meeting time wearing casual clothing. Appearing cheerful and refreshed after the relatively late night before, Levine sat opposite from me at a bay window overlooking the park across the street from the National Arts Club, seemingly willing to answer any question I posed.

At Levine's request, I had given him (the night before) a copy of the questions that I intended on asking so that he could prepare some of his answers. However, I inevitably let the conversation go in its own direction, returning to my specifically formulated questions when the discussion seemed to be stalling. The transcription below adheres as closely as possible to the original conversation, including Levine's pauses and restatements in order to faithfully render the poet's thoughts on his art and process as he actively formulates and conveys them. It should be noted, however, that Levine has read and edited the transcript.

JR: Let me ask you this to begin with: I noticed last night you read the two poems from *Five Points*, which makes sense since it was a celebration for *Five Points*. How do you decide what you want to read when you go to a reading?

PL: Yeah. I rarely decide ahead of time, and last night, I decided because of . . . I actually had a

third poem from *Five Points* that I could have read, but for some reason, I just didn't want to read the other poem. For one thing, it's a poem I've never read. I felt like reading that other poem, that poem "The Two," which is more typical of what I write than either of the other two.

JR: That was a question that I had to ask because a friend of mine had asked me to ask you. We went at Emory last week. We saw you there. She was wondering how you picked what you read.

PL: I think at Emory I had given it very little thought.

JR: O.K. That's interesting. Let me ask you this: In a recent review David Kirby writes, "There are millions of poems out there, and most of them are short, so they go by quickly. But when you need one, nothing else will do." Can you comment on that?

PL: I really don't know what he means.

JR: I guess what I'm getting at partly is – poems – what do they do for you? What do you see their purpose as being?

PL: The variety of poetry is so great that to pin it down to a single purpose aside from the essential purpose of fulfilling the poet. . . .

JR: How does a poem fulfill you?

PL: Well, you have a desire to say certain things or to create certain things. If I had any gift for music, I wouldn't be a poet.

JR: But you don't think poetry has a sense of music to it?

PL: Oh, certainly, but I mean a real musician. If I could play the tenor saxophone . . .

JR: The tenor saxophone, and which tenor saxophonists do you listen to?

PL: Lester Young. Lester Young is my favorite. If I could play a musical instrument, if I could

play the piano like Bill Evans, for example, I don't know that I would be writing very much. I would have a vehicle for expression.

JR: I was going to ask you if it wasn't poetry, what do you think you would be doing?

PL: Well, since I don't have a gift . . .

JR: I find that hard to believe.

PL: . . . for another art. I'm a great listener to music. My wife keeps insisting. Once I retired from Fresno State, she said, "I'm gonna buy you a tenor saxophone." I said, "Honey, it's a waste of time. Your ear is so much better than mine." She has perfect pitch. She can sing everything right on key and get the melody perfectly.

JR: Your gift was poetry.

PL: My gift was poetry, and I found it young.

JR: That's good. One of the things I've read about in your interviews is you talk about and you recognize the fact of how ironic it was that the work that you tried to get away from became such a powerful force in the writing that you do. Do you remember when you came to that realization that what you had been trying to get away from was what was going to give you so much to write about?

PL: Yeah, I can.

JR: Can you tell me about that?

PL: You know that essay where I talk about having a dream? That was it. If you went back and you saw my first book, you would see that there is only a single poem about working in Detroit, and it's no good. But the second book, *Not This Pig* – There's a whole section of poems about Detroit, and Detroit impinges on several others. It was that dream coming to me – almost like a gift from God knows where – except, of course, we create our own

dreams. So it was a gift from myself to me essentially telling me, "You have something here." When I turned fifty, I was reminded again. I went home to Detroit. I'm an identical twin. I celebrated my birthday with my twin brother, and invited an enormous number of people. I spent two or three days there sobering up, and then I came to New York. It was the first time I taught in New York City and the first time since I was very young, in my late teens and early twenties, that I really spent a lot of time here. I spent six months living on the upper-west side teaching at Princeton. When I first arrived to New York, I thought, "This place is so confusing. It's so huge. Thank God that I'm the poet of Detroit." A city which, at one time, I could draw on a map, with most of the streets in it.

JR: From memory?

PL: Yeah – From working as a driver and going all over the city, I knew it very well. I knew the neighborhoods. I knew the schools. I knew everything.

JR: Well, that kind of eye certainly helped you with poetry then, being able to remember all that and bring that in.

PL: When I go there now I'm lost. Freeways have . . . .

JR: There's so much change. You should go to Atlanta. When I go back tonight, I guarantee you I won't know how to get home. I'll be lost. They change the highways and close them down constantly. The bad thing about Atlanta's highways is every right lane exists, so when you get in on the right lane, you're gonna exit no matter whether you want to or not.

PL: And they actually do it. You see here in New York when you get in a right lane and it says "Exit," you do what you want.

JR: You often write about what poetry has done for you and what others have done for poetry. What is it that you hope that you've done for poetry?

PL: I think that if you looked at poetry before I got into it – before I wrote my poetry – you would find something was missing: my poetry.

JR: Exactly.

PL: And the poetry of a working people that didn't sentimentalize from the point of view of someone who did the work and worked with the people. I don't think much of it is there. Muriel Rukeyser writes as an observer and often sentimentalizes. David Ignatow tries, but he's rarely a good enough poet to do it. Williams writes as an observer extraordinary observer – extraordinary, but I can't think of somebody who . . . as Whitman writes as an observer, and again sentimentalizes, makes heroic some of the people he's writing about. I don't make them heroic: I make them who they are, or that's my hope. I think that's what I added – and a certain amount of good cheer.

JR: Do you see or recognize a tension or feeling of separation in your position right now, being as successful as you are, and the subjects that you're frequently associated with? Do you see a . . .

PL: No.

JR: dichotomy there?

PL: No.

JR: I have a follow-up question to that. Is it necessary for authors or artists of any sort to have lived or be living what the subjects they're writing about are going through?

PL: No.

JR: Absolutely no?

PL: If you're good enough, no. But you have to be awfully good. Shakespeare was never a king or a Roman, yet he can write about them.

JR: I remember, two weeks ago at Emory, that Natasha Tretheway had described you as a working-class poet. In fact, she used those words. How do you feel about being described that way at this point in your career?

PL: Usually, I correct it. I didn't bother. I felt great affection for Natasha. She's a very nice woman. I didn't come from the working-class. I came from the middle-class. My father died when I was very young, and my mother did become a working woman. But I think the values of the home were largely American middle-class values that had already been determined, so that we were middle-class without any money. I don't know what that is – lower lower. My mother used to make a wonderful joke. She used to say, "One of Philip's quests is to demonstrate that there's social mobility in America. He was born into the middle-class, and now, he's descended to the working-class. He got it all wrong." She had a great sense of humor. "The idea, Phil, was to go up, not down."

JR: I think you've done a good job of going up.

PL: Yeah, well, since then, I went up. Yeah.

JR: What is your sense of the connections between class and poetry, if there is even a connection?

PL: There is a connection. I think the connection diminishes constantly. That is to say I think there was a time in America when the bulk of our poets, the ones who were at least the recognized poets, came from a particular background – Ivy League – and had connections to the editors and publishers of New York, who also came from the same background. Once the Beats appeared on the scene and really became . . . Allen Ginsberg for example,

the best known poet in the world for a while and Gary Snyder, along with Ginsberg, one of the best known poets in the United States. Neither was being published in New York, and suddenly the university presses got into it, and small presses sprung up, and learned how to distribute their books, and began publishing people who were born in Arkansas, in Texas, in California, and wherever, and who went to school in these places or not at all. I think the whole thing of class . . . and even the Academy of American Poets, which up until about seven or eight years ago was completely dominated by an old boys club that was insulated . . . Not anymore. Although I must say I'm having a hard time bringing Southerners into it.

JR: Can you comment on that a little more? How so?

PL: Well, I've nominated a couple of them, and I haven't gotten very far.

JR: Whom?

PL: Technically, what do we have – two? No, we have one: Yusef Komunyakaa. He's the only one, and I don't think he's there as a Southerner. He's there as an African-American. The particular poets I would like to see in there are Dave Smith, and Rodney Jones, or Terry Hummer. It seems to me that these poets are distinguished enough that they ought to be members.

JR: Keeping on the idea of class and poetry, it seems that your poetry often opens itself to Marxist readings. Do you have any comments on that? I particularly ask because this is the angle I'm looking at for my dissertation.

PL: I got a letter a few days ago from a young man who wants to write, or who is involved in writing, a book on Marxism in American literature and wants to make me one of the main figures. He said, "It won't be the old thing. And it certainly won't be about the kind of

realism that one got out of the Soviet Union." The idea of a Socialist State is something that has enormous appeal to me. I don't honestly think that there's ever been one. The Soviet Union was a totalitarian nightmare that like other totalitarian countries made nightmares out of their neighbors. 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. I was never tempted to join the CP, the Communist Party, which was active in my college when I was young.

JR: You were talking at Emory about that.

PL: Yeah, and essentially the reason why was embodied in those people, the ones I knew. I thought they were idiots. I really thought they were ideologues and idiots, and the idea of being one of them had absolutely no appeal to me. I also have a poem called "The Communist Party." It's in *The Mercy*, and it is about going to a party thrown by young Commies. I go with my brother. We're looking for girls. That's why you go to a party. I never saw so many people together having such a bad time, and I thought, "Don't ever invite me back. I don't need this."

JR: Did they invite you back?

PL: Oh yeah, but I didn't go.

JR: One of the things also from the reading last night – you read the poem "The Two." Your individual working-class and labor related poems can be seen in and of themselves as comments on industrial society and whatnot. However, its seems to me that they can also

be viewed as separate brush strokes for a larger picture that you're trying to paint, which is that living a life of dignity, respect, honor, and meaning is difficult. It is hard work. How much of your working-class poetry, the individual poems, is specifically aimed at addressing issues within industrial society as it is trying to get this bigger picture that life is a difficult journey and it is hard work in and of itself?

PL: Well, to be truthful, when I sit down to write a poem – and every poem is written as a separate event – I couldn't. Those thoughts never enter my mind. I'm just trying to tell a story, trying to capture a scene. I'm trying to make words into music. All of that comes in while I'm doing what I'm trying to do, and if it doesn't come in, then I don't have one of my typical working-class poems. I have another kind of poem, which is OK. I rarely sit down with that kind of thing in mind. In one case I can remember it – in the poem "What Work Is." The reason I can remember is that I was asked to show – I was asked to send – the first draft to an exhibit. I don't remember where it was. I think it was at the Library of Congress. I found the first draft and sent it to them. I could tell by the way it began.

JR: Do you remember how that was?

PL: Oh yeah. The first line I wrote was "Detroit is shit." I sat down and wondered, "Why did I write that?" I remembered why. The night before I had watched on PBS a program about a father. I believe it was a father and a son who beat a young Chinese man to death believing he was Japanese, and motivated out of anger toward the Japanese because of the diminishing Detroit auto industry, which had cost both of them their jobs. I was reminded of the kind of racism that I grew up with – also the violent anti-Japanese emotions that I grew up with, and which I did not harbor even though I hated the nation

of Japan for attacking us. But there were some Japanese kids in my school, and they were American kids. I often wondered what in God's name are those poor guys – two guys – what are they going through? Then they came back to school. December 7th was a Sunday. They were back at school like on Tuesday or Wednesday, and I thought, "What are they going through?" They were taking so much guff, and they carried themselves quietly and with dignity, and it's like "Wooow!" And then later on when I was a working guy, I was working in a drug warehouse in Detroit, and a Japanese guy got a job there. He was a displaced personage. He was from California, but they moved him to Detroit where he couldn't do any harm there. He couldn't help the invading army that would attack California. He was attacked on the first day there, physically attacked. Fortunately, he beat the shit out of the guy who attacked him.

JR: I never understand that myself.

PL: Yeah.

JR: It's just something I can't comprehend, but I guess it's good that I can't comprehend it.

PL: Yeah.

JR: Because it means I have no inclination . . .

PL: You're not carrying it, yeah.

JR: You had said when you work on individual poems, what you're focused on is capturing a scene, capturing a moment. You're basically on that one poem. I want to ask you some questions about your collections of poems. What kind of input do you have when a collection is put together? How are you involved with that collection being put together, specifically?

PL: I make all the choices.

JR: From which poems go in there to the order?

PL: Yes.

JR: And how do you decide the order and that sort of thing? Perhaps it's at that point that maybe an overall picture is beginning to come into play or something. When you start to put the . . .

PL: I'll tell you how it worked. It began to work with the book *They Feed They Lion*. I got an editor with that book – a man named Harry Ford, who was my editor through *The Mercy*. So from 1971 to 1999, I had the same editor. He used to ask me to write a description of the book, which was a terrific exercise. Because in writing the description . . . He gave me weeks to do it. I realized . . . I would write a description and say, "Does that fit? Maybe, maybe not." I'd sit with it for a couple days, and I'd change it and change it. Once I had it and I liked what I had, then I began to look at the poems I had. Did they belong? Sometimes they didn't – took them out. Sometimes there were more poems that were required. I wrote them.

JR: You came up with them on the spot?

PL: No, but I had it in my mind: "Why don't you? Why don't you? Why don't you?" And I did. And it was out of that . . . I think if you looked at my first two books, three books, you would see that, I think, they aren't particularly well organized. They're organized in terms of tone, in terms of emotion, but thematically, they're sort of . . .They're going off in various directions. Later on, with Harry, I began to organize things a lot better. I mean I really . . . I also used other people.

JR: The "acknowledgements" page got a lot bigger.

PL: I would say over the entire course of my career as a writer three people have really been an

enormous help – starting with Peter Everwine and then Larry Levis and . . .oh four . . . and my wife and Edward Hirsch. Of late, I only show it to . . . I show everything . . . I show my books to Ed, Peter, and my wife – those three people. My editor . . . Occasionally, Harry would dislike a poem. I think in all the years he was my editor there were four poems he asked me to remove.

JR: Do you remember the ones they were?

PL: I removed two of them. One was a poem . . . I don't remember the title of it. It's in *Unselected Poems*, and it's about a man named Cherry Dorn, who has a stroke while I'm working. Harry didn't much like it. And another poem he didn't like was in *The Mercy*. It's the first poem in the last section. It's about my parents. I said to him, "Harry, for particular reasons, I need that poem in the book." He was silent for about fifteen seconds, and he said, "Well, it's quite short. It can't do much harm." But for the most part, he just left me alone.

JR: I have to ask. What were those particular reasons?

PL: Superstition. There are eleven poems in each section, and it amounts to thirty-three poems – a very lucky number.

JR: You think so? Hey, I'm thirty-three. I'm hoping.

PL: Yeah – OK – Yeah.

JR: See what happens at thirty-three? This is good. Keeping with the idea of the books, let me ask you this, and this is something that I have always wondered, especially with other authors too. You always have the picture, the author photo, on the back covers usually. Do you specifically think about how you want to present yourself in that picture or how you pick that picture? Or do you just say, "Well, that looks good."

PL: No. I don't. I try to get a picture that looks pretty much the way I look now – at the time that I write the book.

JR: I commend you on that because so many authors . . . are seeing things from thirty years ago.

PL: Yeah, they're using pictures that are thirty years old. For me the reason is practical. When you go to an airport and they come to meet you, they know you through the picture on your book, and you better look like the picture on your book, or they'll walk right by you.

JR: Well, that could be part of the reason why so many use their older photos – because they don't want to be recognized.

PL: Well, you know I'm not Robert Redford. Nobody's going to . . . It's not a problem, right?

JR: Some people think they are Robert Redford, though, of course, unfortunately.

PL: Yes, they do, yeah. I could name a few, but I'm not gonna.

JR: Let's look at the front covers of some of the books of yours – specifically the ones that have the photos, the working-class photos, the factory-type photos. How have those photographers and artists who present those images helped you and influenced you in your poetry?

PL: Not at all.

JR: Not at all?

PL: I don't think so.

JR: How did they get to be on the cover then?

PL: I chose them – often after research. The cover of the newest book, for example, *Breath* . . . There are a lot of poems in there about music – about my own singing. Something I do all the time. But especially about musicians, jazz musicians. I went through a number of volumes looking for a particular photo. I made a determination I didn't want a famous

musician because a famous musician – Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, or Billie Holiday – Somebody would say, "Oh, it's a book about Billie Holiday." So I looked for an obscure musician, and I found the trumpeter Don Cherry, when he was probably about nineteen years old. He's actually standing in Grand Central Station in the subway.

JR: I've seen the cover actually. I went on Amazon and saw the cover.

PL: The cover's a little different from the one they show.

JR: So, basically, you look for something within the collection itself . . .

PL: Yeah, that's right. That's right. I think the most successful cover of all is *What Work Is* – the one that shows the little girl in the cotton mill factory in South Carolina, a Louis Hine photograph, which I found purely by accident after looking through books, and books, and books of Louis Hine's photographs. I happened to go . . . The day that I didn't find the photograph I was looking for . . . I happened to go to the Museum of Modern Art – excuse me, the Metropolitan Museum over on 92nd street. It was a new acquisition, and there it was. I said, "This is it." I called my wife over. I said, "Look honey. Here is what I've been looking for," and she said, "Sure enough, that's it."

JR: Funny how those things work out.

PL: It sure is.

JR: I have to say I admire the cover of *A Walk with Tom Jefferson*.

PL: That I saw in a show of Charles Sheeler's paintings and photographs in Boston. I was really struck by it. The curious thing is the print on the cover of my book is better than the one I saw up there.

JR: Really?

PL: Yeah. Oh, much better. I tried to buy it through the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and I had all kinds of trouble. Suddenly it occurred to me the whole project was commissioned by the Ford Motor Car Company. They must own the negative, so I called Greenfield Village, which is where they store their art – you could say. I talked to a woman there, and I described the photograph. She said, "I know it. We own it. What do you want it for?" I said, "The cover of a book of poems." She said, "Is this a profit venture?" I said, "Madam, it's a book of poems." She said, "Oh! Yes, of course. Well, we can make a print for you, and we can send it to you." The entire charge was forty dollars. I got a big print.

JR: With the permission to use it and everything?

PL: Yep.

JR: Wow.

PL: It was fantastic.

JR: That's wonderful.

PL: Yeah.

JR: Now when I look at it, I'll have a nice story to go along with it. That's great. Let me ask you another question. Industrialism and its damaging effects, of course, play a large part in your poetry. Nowadays technology seems to be taking over. How do you feel about that? Do you see that as working into your poetry at any point?

PL: You know last year *The New York Times* ran a series of articles, which won a Pulitzer Prize, about the abuses of a particular company that was costing people their arms, their fingers, their eyesight, their this, their that. I mean the old methods are still with us today. They will be replaced I assume eventually, but I don't know anything about that.

I never worked with that kind of thing. I can remember the first time I ever saw a hydraulic lift on the back of a truck, so that you put the things on it, and I went, "This is genius."

JR: So you don't see computers or anything of that sort . . .?

PL: It's not my world.

JR: OK. For the record, what, if anything, is good about industrialism?

PL: It produces a great many useful goods that can be purchased by ordinary people quite inexpensively. It also can give a lot of people work. Unfortunately, most of it's terrible work. But I would say the first thing is for certain – what it can produce.

JR: Let's change direction a little bit and go perhaps to some of your poems, to specific ideas about your poems. What poem are you most proud of that you have written? And maybe "proud" is not the word to use. What poem are you most satisfied with as a poet?

PL: The one I'm most satisfied with is "They Feed They Lion."

JR: Now, you say that hesitantly. Is it . . .?

PL: No, it's the one I'm most satisfied with. The one I'm most proud of is "A Walk with Tom Jefferson."

JR: Can you give me reasons why for each of those?

PL: Yeah, the first one, "They Feed They Lion," came quite easily. It seemed to me quite miraculous that it ever got written. It is unlike any other poem I know or I ever wrote successfully. The other one I'm most proud of because it took so much patience to get it right.

JR: How long did it take you?

PL: Over a year.

JR: It's funny. I think I remember hearing this or reading this somewhere. I know you originally started out wanting to write fiction, and in an interview, you had said that one of the reasons why you didn't go into it was because you didn't have the patience of a novelist. It seems that, perhaps maybe, you do have the patience if you can take the time to write a poem over a year.

PL: I would say today I do have the patience. Yeah. But I didn't then.

JR: Do you have any aspirations to work on fiction of any sort now?

PL: Not much. No. I mean fiction is just fiction. It's great when it's . . . Is there a better, is there a more influential, writer in my life than Tolstoy? I don't think so. I'm not sure there is. Is there poetry that measures up to Tolstoy? Yeah. Shakespeare. Dante. I mean that takes a lifetime, and to start . . . You know . . . When did I get the patience? Well, I wrote the "Jefferson" poem probably in my sixties. I realized I had acquired this new kind of patience, but that was a little late to go back and start thinking about being a novelist.

JR: To change directions?

PL: Yeah. I don't know. I had learned how to write poetry. It had been a struggle. This is what I did.

JR: Now, let me ask you this: would you say "A Walk with Tom Jefferson" is the hardest poem you've written – as far as having to have the patience to write it?

PL: It wasn't hard in that way. It wasn't really hard. It just took a lot of . . . A.) willingness to throw a lot away.

JR: Do you know how much you threw away?

PL: Much more than I kept.

JR: That's usually the case unfortunately.

PL: Much more than I kept.

JR: Now let me ask you this: when you say "throw away," do you mean you actually . . .

PL: Yes.

JR: . . . toss it in the trash, in the shredder, and nobody ever sees it?

PL: I just threw it away. Yeah. Yeah. I don't have copies of it. I couldn't produce it.

JR: Can I give you a trash basket, and you could send the contents to me?

PL: Nope. I wouldn't keep it. It was terrible.

JR: I won't put your name on it.

PL: Yeah. Yeah. The problem with it was it had no unity to it. All of it concerned the first half of the poem. It was about nine-hundred lines long – what I wrote – and the entire poem now is about six-hundred and fifty lines – something like that. I wrote about nine-hundred lines in about two or three days. I refined them over about two weeks. I got them down to about 300 and something lines by throwing a lot away. I went off into a dead end. I had characters that aren't in the poem, and I just got rid of them. They were part of the experience I was drawing on, but they weren't part of the poem. Then I got it the way I liked it, and I realized I was about half way there. Now where do I go? Well, that took me a year to realize – not of writing – just thinking.

JR: Figuring out where . . .

PL: Yeah. Every month, I'd pull the thing out and read that first half and say, "Where am I going to take this God damned poem?"

JR: If I remember correctly, also, you had said that you had worked on the poem "Burned" over a long period of time.

PL: Oh yeah.

JR: And even yet, today, you're still not as happy with it as you would have liked to have been.

PL: That's right. So I'm not that proud of it.

JR: Keeping with this – about your specific poems, would you say that "They Feed They Lion" was the easiest poem that came to you?

PL: No, not the easiest. But it came pretty quickly. I wrote it in one morning.

JR: Just the way it is? Without revision?

PL: No. I wrote the first couple stanzas pretty much the way they are. Maybe the third or fourth stanza– the fourth stanza I went off in the wrong direction. I found the manuscript to it. That's why I know this. I wrote two stanzas, and I said "Ooo, no, this is going the wrong place." I went back. I crossed that out, and I went back to the portion of the fourth stanza, and then took it in another direction and got it right. I would say the whole process probably took two hours.

JR: What I wouldn't give.

PL: What I wouldn't give.

JR: What would you say is the easiest?

PL: I don't know. I just don't remember that.

JR: That's fair enough – absolutely fair enough. I want to go in a bit of a different direction but stay on the topic of your poems. This is something I've also noticed in a lot of your poetry and even in the poems last night that you read. There seems to be a lot of bird imagery – finches, quails, particularly sparrows.

PL: Yeah.

JR: Can you give me any insight into that as to why the birds?

PL: They seem miraculous to me – gifted with flying. Sparrows are city birds. They're my favorites. In California, of course, where I live, there are all kinds of birds. They're all around my house – hummingbirds, jays, mockingbirds.

JR: One of the things I also noticed was that in *They Feed They Lion* it seems like there are a lot more, I want to say, darker birds. For instance, I've noticed there's magpies and crows, but in your latter works, the finches and the sparrows come out. Do you see some sort of correlation there?

PL: No, I have crows in *The Mercy*. Crows to me are rather scary, vicious birds.

JR: Ominous.

PL: Yeah, ominous. They've got that expression for a group – you know – they call it a "murder of crows." You know I wouldn't put a crow in a love poem. Now a magpie to me is a different kind of creature altogether. Magpies, mythically, are very curious birds who like to interfere in the business of men and women, and they're rumored to do things like this. They're also thieves. They steal things.

JR: The only magpies I know, of course, are the two cartoon magpies Heckel and Jeckel. I've never seen them – a real magpie.

PL: They're very striking because they're black and when they open their wings there's all this white, so you really see them, and we have them in California, and there was a bird like that when I lived in – I spent four months once in Australia. I forget the name of the bird. It wasn't a magpie, but it looked like one. They called it something else. I've always been intrigued by them partly out of myth – reading about them.

JR: Any chance we'll ever see a California Condor make an appearance.

PL: No. I don't like them. Anyway, that's Robinson Jeffers stuff. You know. Let him have it.

JR: O.K. Let me change directions again. What can you tell me about the idea or the notion of truth within your poetry – how you incorporate it, or how you use it? I guess part of this question comes from what you had said at Emory about how the world uses us enough. It's about time maybe we use the world.

PL: Yeah. My sense of truth is the truth to the poem. That is to say you have to make the poem believable. You use what you know. You don't really know what happened anyway. You see events from your own point of view, so to assume that you "know" the truth is just nonsense. My sense of truth is very Aristotelian. That is to say when Aristotle says that poetry is truer than history – he's really talking, of course, about dramatic poetry, the verse play – but what he "means" is that history is full of accident and error and what have you, whereas the dramatic poem has to seem inevitable. I think the same applies to all poetry. You have to make it seem inevitable for the poem to work.

JR: I remember that one story about "Listen Carefully" where the person was saying "How can you go through this or do this, and this not happen?" You replied, "I don't even have a sister." That's a very interesting answer. Let me ask you this: When you're writing and the poem doesn't go where you had intended it to go, do you follow that new vein or do you try to keep on track? How much do you force yourself to say what it is you think you want to say and how much of it comes . . .

PL: I don't force it. I don't.

JR: . . . when you learn what it is that you want to say?

PL: Right. Absolutely. It's a waste of time to push the poem. The only thing that would stop me from following the poem is if what I was creating seemed to me something I already created, or I was just imitating myself, and I'd say, "Stop. You already wrote this. Don't

write it again. Do something else."

JR: How often does that happen to you?

PL: Not that often. Not that often.

JR: In an interview from *The Paris Review*, James Dickey cites Yeats as saying that "Poetry is a high and lonely profession." How do you feel about that?

PL: Well, I'll give him the "lonely." I don't know what the hell's so high about it. I . . . I really don't. Why's it any higher than painting or coal mining? I mean I don't know what's so high about it. It's a job. You go to it. You do your best. I don't think . . . I don't . . . no . . . I . . . Lonely. . . Yeah – because most of us write in a solitary situation, and we cut ourselves off from people.

JR: But isn't it in doing that writing or cutting yourself off, at that point, aren't you trying to make a connection of some sort?

PL: . . .Trying to create a poem. You're trying to express yourself. Who are you doing it for? Yourself.

JR: O.K. Who are your readers then? Do you see it as you're your only reader?

PL: No. Not if you get as much mail as I get. No. But I don't think . . . When I'm making a poem, I don't think about the numbers of readers. The reader is not thinking about me. He's doing what he has to do.

JR: I'm looking forward to your next book.

PL: Fine.

JR: And I'm sure plenty of other people are.

PL: Yeah, but not when I'm writing the poem. When I'm writing the poem, the readers are busy with something. I can't be bothered with them, and the readers may have certain

expectations that I'm simply not interested in. There's only so much I can think about.

JR: Right, I understand exactly what you're saying. I guess what I'm trying to get at partly is what do you see poetry as contributing to the larger sense of humanity or society? There's got to be a reason why you do poetry. You seem like a person who doesn't do it just for yourself.

PL: Well, the problem with the question is the variety of poets and what they create is so different that any generalization . . . I mean if I just took Whitman I could say it would be to present a new vision.

JR: How about with you?

PL: I'm not the person to evaluate my own work.

JR: OK

PL: That's up to other people. You start evaluating your own work – you start taking yourself way too seriously.

JR: I'll ask it another way. What would you hope that your poetry would contribute to society – not what it does and you think it does?

PL: I've never thought about it.

JR: Never?

PL: I did when I was very young. Oh, yeah, when I was very young.

JR: And how did that . . . Why did that change?

PL: Because I woke up. First thing, how much can you do without readers? When I was very young, I didn't have readers, but I had a design. I also thought I knew the way people ought to live. I no longer believe that I know the way people ought to live. I know the way a lot of them shouldn't live, but I don't actually have a social program. I can talk

about the ills of society, but I don't have a cure for them. I think people should be more honest. I think people should be kinder to each other. I think people should be motivated by things other than money. I think all kinds of things. But I'm not a lecturer. I don't want to hector people in my poems.

JR: I think that's one of the strengths of your poetry and that's one of the reasons why I'm drawn to it so much. It's not telling me what way to be. It's only saying, in a sense, "This is what happened. This is who I am, or this is what I think."

PL: This is what these people were like.

JR: Take it or leave it.

PL: Yeah.

JR: I admire that very much because I think it's too easy for writers to start saying, "Well, this is the way it should be. This is the way you should do it." Like you said, you get to thinking too much of yourself.

PL: Somebody asked me, "How do you get around New York?" I said, "I take the subway." He said, naming a particular poet, "He never goes on the subway." I said, "There's nothing wrong with him physically. He's as agile as I am." So I said something sort of stupid. I said, "All good poets should take the subway." And, of course, he said, "Why?" It was a thing like this, and I said, "Because that's where people are. They ought to be where people are. They ought to see how people live."

JR: And in that sense, it doesn't seem like it's a lonely profession.

PL: Well, if you look at Whitman or Williams, from whom I take many cues, you are an observer, and if you're only going to observe people at fancy cafes and restaurants, you're not going to see the people. I remember in Studs Terkel's book about the

depression there were people who lived in New York and said, "Oh, that was just Roosevelt's propaganda. There was never a Depression. Nobody I knew was out of work." Of course, all they knew were millionaires – who never worked anyway. You know Terkel was interviewing fashion photographers, people like that – "What depression?" My sense is . . . When I lived up near Harlem, I used to walk through Harlem. What the hell's it like? Why should I be afraid of it? Why shouldn't I go into it and see what it is?

JR: Right. Absolutely. Whole-heartedly, I agree with you. Now, I am going off the questions I had. This is just something that occurred to me, with what we have been talking about. How is it that you feel that a poem is supposed to affect a person – I guess I'm trying to formulate the question here – in the sense that, you know, somebody reads a poem, they feel good, it does something for them, but then the poem's over, and they go back to their lives. I guess I'm just trying to ask what is the meaning of poetry?

PL: When I was young . . .

JR: Or what is the purpose of poetry?

PL: When I was young, and I read poetry and I read fiction, I didn't go back to my life the same person. I was changed by it.

JR: By each . . .

PL: Oh, yes.

JR: Poem – each work of fiction?

PL: Well, each body of poetry. I read Yeats – the kind of heroism and beauty of personal relationships and his love for his family. That was very moving for me. I read Hardy.

JR: Thomas Hardy – wonderful.

PL: Yeah. His poetry moved me. D.H. Lawrence and his relations between men and women – I began to see relations between men and women differently. Hemingway – *A Farewell to Arms* – I saw heroism differently. Wilfred Owen – I saw war differently. He was the first poet who had an enormous effect on me.

JR: Wilfred Owen?

PL: Yes. I read him when I was seventeen years old, during World War II. When I turned eighteen, I was going to face the draft.

JR: "Red lips are not so red / as the stained stones kissed . . ."

PL: ". . . by the English dead. / Kindness of wooed and wooer / Seems shame to their love pure." Yeah. I read him, and I saw that a combatant, who gave his life, would see war very differently from the way the newspapers were seeing it, the way the movies were seeing it, the way news reels were seeing it, the way *Life* magazine saw it, the way . . . All the media that I encountered saw war differently from the way Wilfred Owen did. I realized that my own feelings toward going to war were valid. I didn't want to go to war. I had no desire to kill anybody or to get killed or maimed, and here I'm reading Owen telling me those emotions are perfectly valid. Well, the effect on me was enormous.

JR: I can imagine.

PL: Yes.

JR: I guess part of it, and this is more personal. I was telling your wife this last night. My father went into . . . He got his degree in computer science and engineering. I told him I wanted to go into English. I mean he supported me and everything, but you know, "English, C'mon!" But then when I mentioned to him that I was coming to talk to you, his ears just perked up because he knew who you were, and it eventually hit him that I was doing

something worthwhile. So, I guess part of it is I'm . . . At this point, I'm trying to struggle with why is it I'm studying poetry and that. I realize it's not for you to figure out.

PL: No. It ain't.

JR: But partly I'm just trying to get some of your insight as to why poetry is such a strong force within your life.

PL: You can't underestimate the beautiful. The beautiful is a kind of gift that we get. I find it in the language of Dylan Thomas, or W. B. Yeats, or William Carlos Williams, or Wallace Stevens. Just seeing, hearing and seeing, language used . . . so perfectly, so . . . exquisitely is rewarding itself. To me it's an enormous reward, especially living in a world where language gets mutilated constantly.

JR: Manipulated and everything.

PL: Yes.

JR: I agree with you on that. I think we have covered most of the questions I had for you.

PL: Good.

JR: I have got to say, "Thank you."