PHILIP LEVINE

Poems

Introduced by Paola Loreto

I met Philip Levine at the Bogliasco Foundation (Genoa) in 2000, and I am still grateful for the opportunity I have of knowing him personally. The man shares with the poet his stance: an attitude of sweetly ironic detachment from life that barely suffices to contain his painful and vulnerable sharing in it. The poetry Levine is currently writing is an unstoppable metamorphosis of the voice that constantly shifts its poise between a passionate adherence to things and a cautious distancing from them. Both when the case allows for celebration and when it allows for no hope of redemption, the closing statement of a typical Levine poem is never final, never one-flavored. Levine's best achievements are produced when the connotation of his words runs against their manifest meaning. The experience of the poem is then a shocking recognition of an overlooked emotion or feeling.

The poetry of Philip Levine has been constantly evolving. As one of his best critics, Edward Hirsch, has put it, "his work begins in rage, ripens toward elegy, and culminates in celebration," so that "what starts as anger deepens into grief and finally rises into joy." Thus, the path of a poet who set out determined to give voice to some of the most neglected social groups of contemporary industrial America has led him to succeed in redeeming and preserving their daily lives and gestures.

In this new poem by Philip Levine the distancing/ approaching device is the use of the child persona and of his perspective. "The Silence of Summer" is another denouncement of

violence by a poet who has written many, among which are the urban, factory fury of *Not This Pig* (1968), his portrayal of industrial Detroit (before and after the 1967 riots) in *They Feed They Lion* (1972), and his elegy for the anarchist heroes of the Spanish Civil War in *The Names of the Lost (1976).*

Memory is perhaps the single most eloquent muse of Levine's poetry. This poem, with its lucid recalling of a child's response to Violence, is a feat of memory. Only an admirable memory can recall how it is with children, who perceive things through their subjectivity: the child in the poem knows the man is shouting because *he* would be. The device is made even more effective, because the child's response is opposed to that of his aunt, who is in age an adult. During a conversation in which we were discussing the poem, Levine defined the child's objective view of things as an almost surgical vision. The child notes many small details and is distressed by none of them—neither the blood, nor the fainting, or his aunt's panic. For him, when the man's eyes roll back he inhabits an inner state of peace. The aunt fears he may be dying, but death is not real to the child. What is real are all those extraneous details, like the contents of the man's pockets and the pharmacy displays. Nor is he frightened of the dark, and since he has behaved like an adult and his aunt—in his eyes—like a child, he enacts in the form of play his proper role as an a cavalry officer. His vision clearly rises out of family myths, children's literature and especially Hollywood movies. He is powerful, hence adult, and he cannot be stopped. The irony is that in spite of his masterly tone he is wrong about almost everything, except his vision of the future: new wars are brewing (the Spanish Civil War that summer and World War II three years hence), and they will take people he needs and in some cases never return them.

During our talk, Levine finally avowed that the trick for him was to write the poem as an adult and still see it mainly through the boy's eyes but keep open the option to speak from the adult's point of view a few times. He added that he hoped that what had come out in the conversation would be helpful to the understanding and enjoyment of the poem. The twin muse of

Levine's poetry is, I believe, his infallible sense of what is humane in things. So, while I wish to thank Philip for allowing *RSA* to publish "The Silence of Summer", I hope that this new attempt of his to embrace and let speak, simultaneously, two opposed responses to grief and death will show his readers to what poetical results a lifelong devotion to memory and the humane can lead.