

Philip Levine Introduction: September 28, 2001

Philip Levine left the city of Detroit long ago, but in his work he has returned persistently. In one recent poem he asks why he cannot “let it go.” Part of the explanation, as he has said elsewhere, is the importance of the places and, especially, the people in his memory. But his poems also recognize this city’s broader significance. In his poetry, Detroit is, for good or ill, “the exact center of the modern world,” a place of “biblical” events, “founded / by de la Mothe Cadillac for the distant purposes / of Henry Ford.” Most of all, it is a place where one finds sometimes startling examples of human dignity in the face of modern industrial oppression.

For this is poetry that celebrates not Detroit but Detroiters. Often in Philip Levine’s poems, Detroit is a cold, bleak, and gray place. He writes no odes to the city’s skyline or its industry. Instead, he concentrates on the dignity of factory workers, laundry workers, fruit vendors, musicians, gardeners --people who are often ignored. His poetry understands their anger, fatigue, humor, and capacity for love. And in the night’s darkness, in their gardens, or in one another’s company, these Detroiters may encounter what *is* beautiful in their city: a glimmer on the river, the scent of growing things, the moonlight on a mound of snow. An urban artist practices the aesthetics of the common and values the simple, timeless pleasures that often cost nothing and require only the gift of perception.

As we at Marygrove continue to study what scholars, artists, and writers have made of our city, we will keep learning from this man who left Detroit nearly five decades ago, but cannot “let it go.” We cannot let it go either, and we will not let go of his words.

Please welcome home Philip Levine.

--Frank D. Rashid