Philip Levine's *News of the World*: The Sum of Uncertainties

by Stephen Toskar

Abstract: *News of the World* (published last fall when the poet was 81; he is now 82), Philip Levine's twentieth volume of poetry by some counts, seems to be an effort on the part of the poet to sum up the poetic truths of a lifetime, to recapture and clarify in the simplest language possible the "news" that is the bread of men's souls. At the same time the book tries to demonstrate Levine's great debt to the genius poet John Keats, struck down by TB in his youth, poetically embodying the earlier poet's philosophically astute idea of "negative capability." In this paper, therefore, I would like to investigate the philosophical and poetic influences that yield a more meaningful understanding of this book.

フィリップ・レヴィーンの『世界のニュース (News of the World)』

ー不確実性の総和ー

スティーブン・トスカー

抄録：『世界のニュース』(この詩人が 81 歳の昨年秋に出版された。現在は 82 歳である。) は、数えた方によってレヴィーンの 20 番目の詩集であり、人間の魂の糧である「ニュース」を可能な限り単純なことばで再現し、明らかにしている、いわば、この詩人の生涯の詩的真実を総まとめしたような労作である。同時にこの作品は、「消極的にしていられる能力 (negative capability)」を詩的に具体化することによって、レヴィーンが若くして結核に倒れた天才詩人、ジョン・キーツにいかに負っているかも示そうとしている。本論文は、レヴィーンのこの作品のより深い理解を得られるような哲学的そして詩的影響を探る。

With his incredible work ethic (see quotation below in reference to Hardy, et al.), perhaps it should come as no surprise to readers who are familiar with him that Philip Levine has published yet another volume of poetry, his twentieth by some counts, at the age of 81; he is now 82. *News of the World* captures the themes of a lifetime and tries to distil the poet's message in as clear and unambiguous a way as Levine has ever done. It also "takes up questions of end-gaming."[1] Where in the past his images and expression could confound as much as elucidate his message, in this new book we find as clear an expression as we have ever seen from Levine. He notes: "Today I just want to get some words down on a page that are pleased to be together, words that sing & still make some sense & maybe even tell a story or present a person or a place or both."[2] Did Levine foresee his octogenarian achievement? Commenting on other artists and philosophers active into their 80s, Levine started with his assessment of Thomas Hardy:

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> A great artist in his last days still in possession of perfect mastery over our magnificent language. It's truly inspiring to see an artist in his final years capable of such technical wizardry & emotional power. Other examples come to mind: Monet, Picasso, Matisse, Sophocles, & in our own time Pablo Casals & Stanley Kunitz....Is there any likelihood that I could join these giants?...I wouldn't bet on it. In my sixty-five years of stumbling toward verse I've never done anything to suggest such mastery was alive or even dormant within me. But I also know how monumentally stubborn I am, & how deeply I believe in scrubbin' [a reference to a repetition in a song Levine heard Lightnin' Hopkins sing at a retirement home in Fresno, implying that one should keep working at what one knows how to do]. If clean clothes is all I get, so be it. One of the glories of writing poetry is just how badly & how often you can fail & still believe in your right & need to make poems; if you have any success at all, it is utterly thrilling.[3]

Levine owes much to John Keats' philosophy, especially as he found it years ago in Keats' letters. On the idea of "negative capability," he writes in his introduction to the selected poems of Keats which he edited:

> His notion of what is required of a poet, that is, of a person who lives fully and morally, is surprisingly contemporary. In a letter to his brothers when he was just twenty-two, he considers what it is that forms "a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously — I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason...." A case could clearly be made that Keats anticipated Existentialism by over a hundred years. The letters are a great book for anyone interested in what it is like to be a poet, to be young, to be human, and they are of the same fabric as his poetry and his life.[4]

Not only does Levine take this idea of being able to work in a state of uncertainty to heart — it is indeed one of the core themes of this book — he also draws heavily on other ideas from Keats letters. How, for example, are we to understand a description of children in "Before the War" in this current volume?

> At eight or nine,
> even at eleven, kids are the same,
> without an identity, without a soul,
> things with bad teeth and bad clothes.
> ...
>
> It's her son, Sol, she loves,
> the one hiding with one knee
> down on the concrete drawing
> the day's last heat. He's got feelings.
> Young as he is, he can feel heat,

cold, pain, just as a dog would
and like a dog he'll answer
to his name. Go ahead, call him,
"Hey, Solly, Solly boy, come here!"
He doesn't bark, he doesn't sit,
he doesn't beg or extend one paw
in a gesture of submission.
He accepts his whole name, even
as a kid he stands and faces us,
just as eleven years from now
he'll stand and face his death
flaming toward him on a bridge-
head at Remagen while Gertrude
goes on typing mechanically
into the falling winter night.[5]

His description of the child seems almost pediaphobic, but if we take recourse to the ideas of Keats, we find that is not the case at all, but Levine's working out the philosophy of Keats in poetic form — almost giving the philosophy a poetic form in homage to his hero —, an explanation of human growth in this world of suffering:

> He rejects the conventional notion of the world as a "vale of tears...from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven." He finds the notion petty and prefers to conceive of the world as "The Vale of Soul Making," for then there will be a use for exactly this world. ...It is only through the medium of a world like ours that these sparks can be schooled and acquire individual identities, and in his imagination the world becomes grander for this system not of salvation but of "Spirit-creation." What a singularly noble version of our lives! "Do you not see how necessary a World of pains and trouble is to school and Intelligence and make it a Soul? A place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways."[6]

Here we find an attitude toward the suffering of this world, and toward change, with all the upheavals of the spirit that they bring, that translates into poems as agnostic parables about how to live.[7]

So, just what is the "news" that Levine will be bringing us in this book? Upon reading it we are left with pitiful little news in the way we are used to digesting it in everyday print form or in other media. Levine had very early taken to heart another of his early heroes, William Carlos Williams, and in this way we understand the "news" of poetry as the news the heart needs to endure and grow, something apart from literal facts and occurrences:

> At age eighteen, when I found the poetry in English of the last century and a half--Stephen Crane first,

then Eliot, Auden, Spender, Wilfred Owen, Dylan Thomas, Yeats, Hardy, Stevens, Frost, Dickinson, Whitman, and finally Williams--I took Williams' famous words from "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower" very seriously and recited them to any innocent victim I could corner:

> It is difficult
> to get the news from poems
> yet men die miserably every day
> for lack
> of what is found there.[8]

We can find an even deeper discussion of the value of authentic poetic expression — of the news men need to hear in order to live — in Holden.[9] He postulates that to the degree a poem is authentic — and that means the opposite of the corrupt use of language as found in advertising and it's corresponding corrupting effect on society and human relationships — the reader will be led to assent to its truth:

> In order to compel our assent, truth in a poem must be..."earned." It must be discovered afresh through the very process of composition--through action by which some structure, some set of connections, is revealed. And it is our sense of such action, of the poet working alone in his or her poem, which will lend that poem the authenticity which makes us assent to its poetic "truth," to that clarification of value which an achieved poem ultimately delivers.[10]

In the course of this paper, then, I will be attempting to explain some of the key poems of *News of the World* in terms of the various poetic and philosophical backgrounds that Levine holds, explaining those backgrounds in concert with the poems.

In the title poem, "News of the World," one of several prose poems in the collection, the speaker travels out of Barcelona into the Principality of Andorra, ostensibly to buy a radio. There he encounters a world caught in some sort of time warp, or a simultaneity of times and cultures:

> "Because of the mountains, reception
> is poor," the shop owner said, so he tuned into the local Communist
> station beamed to Spain. "Communist?" I said. Oh yes, they'd
> come twenty-five years ago to escape the Germans, & they'd stayed.
> "Back then," he said, "we were all reds." "And now?" I said. Now
> he could sell me anything I wanted. "Anything?" He nodded. A
> tall, graying man, his face carved down to its essentials. "A Cadil-
> lac?" I said. Yes, of course, he could get on the phone & have it out

> front--he checked his pocket watch--by four in the afternoon.
> "An American film star?" One hand on his unshaved cheek, he
> gazed upward at the dark beamed ceiling. "That could take a week."[11]

Here the values of life have been overrun by commercialism, by capitalism, and the irony of the poem is that the Communist station, a holdout from World War II, is beaming its outworn message to modern Spain from this most inauthentic of places, and that is the only news the radio can pick up:

> For though there's no real news that this radio can convey, involuntarily, it broadcasts an ongoing juxtaposition, an example of humanity's constant conflict and contingent situation — in this case, the bizarre mish-mash of Communism, mercantilism, history and nature erupting in the middle of Spanish exurbia. The conversation is bizarre and comic, and one can just imagine the Marxist propaganda, and its long-defunct slogans, blaring in the background.[12]

In his early life Levine worked in the factories and sweatshops of Detroit in order to support himself and pay his way through college. The work was demeaning and deadening and the younger Levine was discouraged about ever being able to break out of that blue-collar life. In addition, in his twenties he couldn't find anyone writing about the lives and sufferings of the people who made up his life, and as a true son of Whitman,[13] he felt he had to find a way to put that world into poetry:

> Decades ago, he liberated new territory in American poetry by focusing on work and workers. While this had been a significant part of Whitman's project in *Leaves of Grass*, Levine, writing a century later, had the advantage of the new Modernist era. His entire body of work is drenched (though invisibly) in the understanding imparted to the twentieth century by Marx, Darwin, and Freud. While Whitman gave us our first American portraits of ourselves as workers, carving the young nation out of the wilderness, creating a new culture from whole cloth, learning how to live together in our diversity, his essentially Romantic ideology required a radical revision by the time fourteen-year-old Phil Levine "discovered poetry" after an iconic summer, laboring miserably in a soap factory. Whitman's bountiful vision could not account for the complete breakdown of capitalism enacted by the Great Depression, and it had no coherent explanation for worker-on-worker strife, or the great wave of racism and anti-Semitism that swept through the west as material fortunes floundered. What Levine contributed to our literature was a continuation of Whitman's subject, but infused with a more realistic understanding of the hidden aspects of working life, the power of the unconscious, and the enormity of the historical, social, and economic forces stacking the deck against ordinary citizens.[14]

So in this volume also we find many poems dealing with the lives of working people, modern descendents of Whitman's America, people who feel trapped with little hope for escape. Look, for example, at part of "On Me," in which a young man understands he has become a man because he finally "gets" the violent domestic

rages of his father, and indeed others, when he listens to his mother humming while she cleans up the debris from the night before:

> ...The next morning would be
> so quiet that from his room upstairs
> he'd hear the broomstraws scratching the floor
> as his mother swept up the debris, and hear
> her humming to herself. Now it's so clear,
> so obvious, he wonders why it took
> so long for him to get it and come of age.[15]

What he gets is that this life breeds such frustration and rage that not to accept it as part of life, to fight against it, is childish.

In "Closed" we find a picture of frustration that grows out of wanting a simple breakfast after a night shift and finding the only restaurant closed:

> "For eight hours I been think-
> ing of nothing but breakfast," said Bernie. "This has spoiled my
> whole weekend, maybe my whole life." By this time the sun had
> cleared the stacks of the transmission plant & broken through the
> dusty window of the deli. The Greek shielded his eyes & knew it
> was going to be a long day; maybe he'd clean the front window,
> tidy up the place. "I got coffees & fresh milks," he said, "those lit-
> tle pies you guys like." "Okay," said Bernie & put both hands on
> the counter & leaned in to them. "If I had anything left in me," he
> said, "I'd cry."[16]

A poem that is interesting to compare with "Closed" is "An Extraordinary Morning." In that poem:

> Two young men — you just might call them boys —
> waiting for the Woodward streetcar to get
> them downtown. Yes, they're tired, they're also
> dirty and happy. Happy because they've
> finished a short workweek, and if they're not rich
> they're as close to rich as they'll ever be
> in this town.[17]

Here we see what seems like a very happy picture of the two young men, but their happiness is ironic. In those last two lines their future and their failure is sealed: they will never have any more than this in this life.

One other blue-collar poem, "Of Love and Other Disasters," begins as prosaically as any Levine poem you could find: "The punch press operator from up north / met the assembler from West Virginia / in a bar near the stadium," but then he weaves his story so that we understand what worlds of quiet desperation these two could-be lovers inhabit. The man, unhappily divorced, finds the woman to be just the opposite of what his type of woman might be, but her familiarity, her pleasantness, her simple act of wiping a spot off his glasses, leaves him vulnerable and wanting, all the time knowing how badly this could end:

> "There," she said, handing
> him back his glasses, "I got it," and even
> with his glasses on, what she showed
> him was nothing he could see, maybe
> only make-believe. He thought, "Better
> get out of here before it's too late," but
> suspected too late was what he wanted.[18]

But perhaps the bleakest picture of the blue-collar worker that we get is in "Arrival and Departure," a poem about an American Indian who comes to Detroit in winter looking for work. He is befriended by the speaker, who is wary of him at first due to his size, but they both find themselves in the same situation of having come to the city looking for a paycheck, or at least that hourly wage: "Like you I thought / 2.35 an hour was money." The speaker escapes, the Indian — well, the implication is he doesn't make it:

> ...If your sister,
> widowed now, should call today and ask
> one more time, "Where is he at? I need him,
> he needs me," what should I tell her?
> He's in the wind, he's under someone's
> boot soles, he's in the spring grass, he lives
> in us as long as we live. She won't buy it,
> neither would you. You'd light a cigarette,
> settle your great right hand behind my neck,
> bow down forehead to forehead, your black hair
> fallen across your eyes, and mutter something
> consequential, "Bullshit" or "God amighty"
> or "The worst is still to come." You came north
> to Detroit in winter. What were you thinking?[19]

No Levine volume would be complete without poems about family members. Several of the poems here refer to a brother (Levine has a twin), at least one to his father who died when Levine was five (the central trauma in Levine's life), and now two that I would like to comment on, one that refers to his grandfather and the other to an uncle.

In "My Fathers, the Baltic," the speaker goes back to try to discover the spot where his grandfather departed the old country to come to America. The image of the sea here is very powerful, and in fact, the sea appears in many of the poems in this volume, either ominously or ambiguously. The vastness of the sea makes man appear insignificant and helpless, and its incessant motion reeks of eternity, or eternal nothingness, but in this poem, there is also the slightest sense of a blessing, a sea that brought his grandfather to America and therefore started the course of his own life. But all blessings are mixed; the poem "allows no space for providence and no place for redemption. The elemental forces of this world show nothing but indifference."[20]

Yusel Prisckulnick,
I bless your laughter
thrown in the wind's face,
your gall, your rages,
your abiding love
for money and all
it never bought,
for your cracked voice
that wakens in dreams
where you rest at last,
for all the sea taught
you and you taught me:
that the waves go out
and nothing comes back.[21]

"Yakov," the uncle that came to America from Siberia, left a world of spellbinding silence where he lived in a pristine forest to come to Detroit, one of the noisiest and dirtiest places in America, somewhat echoing the story of the Indian in "Arrival and Departure," though his cabin in the hills of the South was far less idyllic. Yakov is a larger than life character who tried to escape, perhaps vainly, from the hellhole he found himself in:

Yakov, my old grease shop partner,
one day hung up his apron,

put down his gloves and wristbands,
and went off in smoke. If he came
to my door now on his trek
to nowhere I'd welcome him back
with black wine and black bread,
a glass of tea, a hard wood floor
to sleep on, and hope the new day
brought him the music of silence.[22]

Anyone who has read Levine knows what a vital role work plays in his poems. In this book, "Library Days" states unequivocally that the work of the poet is legitimate work in its own right. Rigsbee poses a spurious argument about the poem, that Levine is posing a dilemma: "deadening work or no-money-making imagination? It's the question raised by a previous collection, What Work Is, for if what work is is work, then the work of literature is either a transvaluation or a lie."[23] However, what we have in "Library Days" is Levine's unequivocal statement that the work of the artist is work of value and dignity, that this, too, is work:

I would sit for hours with the sunlight
streaming in the high windows and know
the delivery van was safe, locked in the yard
with the brewery truck, and my job was secure.
...
...I knew then
that soon I would rise up and leave the book
to go back to the great black van waiting
patiently for its load of beer kegs, sea trunks
and leather suitcases bound for the voyages
I'd never take, but first there was War and Peace,
there were Cossacks riding their ponies
toward a horizon of pure blood, there was Anna,
her loves and her deaths, there was Turgenev
with his impossible, historical squabbles,
Chekhov coughing into his final tales. The trunks —
with their childish stickers — would wait, the beer
could sit for ages in the boiling van slowly
morphing into shampoo. In the offices and shops,
out on the streets, men and women could curse
the vicious air, they could buy and sell
each other, they could beg for a cup of soup,

a sandwich and tea, some few could face life
with or without beer, they could embrace or die,
it mattered not at all to me, I had work to do.[24]

Readers of Levine will also not be surprised to find poems here of the Spanish Civil War and the Spanish anarchist movement of the 1930s, a fight he came to equate with the struggle of the working man in the industrial centers of American, particularly Detroit.[25] In response to a question about his involvement in the ideology of the times, Levine replied:

> It's hard for me to recapture the sense I had back in 1965 of the dedication & selflessness of those men & women, the great Spanish anarchists — Buenaventura Durruti, Ascaso, Garcia Oliver, Federica Montseny, Ricardo Sanz, Cipriano Mera & others—their total faith in their cause which I believed & still believe was just & visionary. They wanted to bring into being a world without barriers, a world in which men & women were stewards of the earth & shared its riches & its burdens equally. For many years those beliefs sustained me, at times I even believed that someday such a world would be ours. During those years I believed life had a purpose. It was as close as I've ever come in my life to a sincere religious faith. I still derive inspiration from "the idea," as it once was called.
>
> Unfortunately in the USA Libertarianism has come to mean ending all government restrictions on individuals & corporations so they can exploit unchecked everything & everyone.[26]

Of the several poems that deal with the Spanish Civil War, "Alba" is one of the most interesting. It recounts the story of an execution, on "a spit / of land overlooking the sea," of a large number of the businessmen of Barcelona, obviously not cooperative with the Nationalists:

All at once the men were herded
to the land's edge and shot dead. I'm told
on good authority there is a lesson here,
one I am in need of. For Gonzáles Brilla,
twenty five, the militia commandant,
his head wrapped in a red and black scarf,
the lesson was clear. Before the ragged volley
called in the day, he shouted it out,
but with the wind swirling, the waves breaking
and those about to die abusing their gods,
no one heard.

Most of the poem is not about the execution itself, but an attempt to locate the exact words spoken at the

execution by González Brilla, words of great revolutionary import . There is an explanation of how the comrade of Brilla, Ramón Puig, heard him rehearsing his speech the night before, but could not remember the exact words, but only that he said,

> "You, the guilty, who are about to die,
> to leave the stage of history, behold...
> behold...something or other" was all
> Puig could remember.

Then the speaker talks to Brilla's widow (Brilla himself had later been executed) and she says her husband never spoke words like that in his life. Later the speaker finds Puig in a public hospital and "he remembered nothing." Driving further on with his wife, the speaker finds the place where the executions took place. They got out of the car:

> My wife and I stopped and parked the rental car.
> Hand in hand we walked to the edge
> of the continent. No gunfire echoed
> from the past, or if it did, the sea
> silenced it....
> ...dead ahead
> the ancient impossible sea moving
> slowly toward us as it broods on itself.
> Can you hear them now, the words of Brilla,
> the elusive lesson worth all those lives?
> Above the cries of seagulls, the message comes
> translated into the language of water and wind,
> decipherable, exact, unforgettable, the same
> words we spoke before we spoke in words.[27]

We are left with a very ironic tale of the futility of war and the ideas men hold so highly, of the words they use to defend indefensible acts, again bringing us back to the theme of the corruption of authenticity in language, for if advertising corrupts language, what can we say of politics?

I would like to move on to the most openly "end-gaming" of the poems in *News of the World*, "Burial Rites." Here Rigsbee misreads the poem as a wish on the part of Levine to be free of history, of the burden of history, for if ever a theme was important to Levine, it is the past. Luckily, when asked about this interpretation, Levine was able to correct it himself: "To be honest, I don't know what you're referring to. In…"Burial Rites,"… I speak of my name being released from me, & how free it would be, a tiny ethereal me. I'm referring to the

notion of release from my personal history, all my short-comings, failures, fuck-ups."[28] The poem recounts how Levine had buried his mother's ashes in his wife's garden "beside a young lilac that's now / taller than I." His meditation on his mother's death naturally leads him to think of his own, on what would become of his name and fame:

Think of it,
my name, no longer a portion
of me, no longer inflated
or bruised, no longer stewing
in a rich compost of memory
or the simpler one of bone, kitty-
litter, the roots of the eucalyptus
I planted back in '73,
a tiny me taking nothing, giving
nothing, empty, and free at last.[29]

Finally I would like to look at the last poem of the book, "Magic," which truly is magical in that it is a reenactment of growth from adolescence, from naiveté to maturity, from the security of dependence to the insecurity and self-making of independence. The speaker is a young man working at the Michigan Central Terminal, now abandoned:

The Michigan Central Terminal
--now only a hollow shell surrounded
by double chain-link fences and ignored--
was once the scene of my enlightenment.
…
...When I tell
my grandkids I grew up in a magic world
in which cats and dogs traveled first class,
snow arrived as late as June to cool
the switch engines, and elms and maples
sprang up full-grown overnight between the tracks
and held their leaves through a dozen seasons,
they wink at each other and pretend I'm sane.
I never mention Carey or his friend,
the Mexican middleweight who hit me
for saying you could spell Catholic without
a capital "C." Although I'd known facts were useless,

something essential vanished from my world
when Carey joined the air force, the county
cut down the last family of copper beeches
to make way for US 24, and the full moon
turned its back on me for the duration.
Two years later, Carey, back from Korea
with graying hair and a flying cross,
smashed his old 78s of Pres cut
before World War II, the high tenor cry
behind Billie Holiday that took us closer to paradise
than we'd ever been. It took me years to learn
a way of walking under an umbrella
of indifferent stars, and to call them "heavenly
bodies," to regard myself as no part
of a great scheme that included everything.
I had to put one foot in front of another,
hold both hands out for balance, stare ahead,
breathe like a beginner, and hope to arrive.[30]

The speaker was thrilled by the exotic nature of his work, of unloading things and creatures from all over the world, of his dreams of those places. He befriends Carey, who also works at the terminal, and therein begins a relationship of dependence in which the speaker revels. They share a love of the jazz of Lester Young, nicknamed Pres by Billie Holliday, and the speaker almost participates in an early version of "Fight Club," but the Germans they were supposed to let off steam with never showed up. The whole air of the poem is magical, until, that is, we move into the break in the relationship between the speaker and Carey, who seems like he came back from the war with post traumatic stress disorder and can no longer be a friend. There is nothing for the speaker to do but find his way in this world on his own, in fear and trembling. Indeed, this final movement of the poem with its move toward self-reliance seems to lose its air of magic in the face of stark reality. The speaker must move ahead with negative capability and mold a life of authenticity that only he can do for himself.

Though there are many more noteworthy poems in News of the World, I think it's safe to say that while not breaking much in terms of new ground, Levine has solidified the themes he has been working on for a lifetime, paid due homage to Keats in his work, and honed his craft to the upmost in clarity. It is a volume filled with news for these uncertain times.

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