

# On Larry Levis' *Elegy*: The Image Doesn't Stop Here

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**Abstract :** Larry Levis' untimely death in 1996 at age 49 came as a shock to the poetry world. His last book of poems, *Elegy*, was published posthumously, edited by long-time friend and mentor Philip Levine, and is a work of astonishing power. It derives part of that power from the interweaving of multiple images that play off each other and thereby give an increasingly powerful effect to the book as a whole. In this paper, I will concentrate mainly on the use of the imagery of the spiderweb, most pronounced in "Elegy for Whatever Had a Pattern in It," and try to show how that image is repeated in the book in other poems, and how the images of other poems are therefore drawn into the web of accumulated images. This is only a preliminary study and cannot possibly cover the full depth of Levis' use of imagery in *Elegy*.

Larry Levis' untimely death in 1996 at age 49 came as a shock to the poetry world, not only because of his relative youth, but because he was, as his one-time mentor, poet Philip Levine, wrote in his foreword to this last, posthumously-published book of his poetry, which he edited, "one of our essential poets at the very height of his powers. His early death is a staggering loss for our poetry, but what he left is a major achievement that will enrich our lives for as long as poetry matters."<sup>1</sup>

Levine relates in the foreword how he came into possession of the poems after Levis' death, and the manner in which both he and Levis had made a ritual for many years going over each other's books before publication. They would offer advice, weed out irrelevant or weak material, and just generally help prepare the works for their final form to go to the publisher. The difference this last time was that Levis was no longer there to give input on his own book. In addition, Levine was in possession of multiple versions of many of the poems. He therefore had to rely on input from Levis' friends to help date the versions, and on the assistance of two other poets, both long-time friends of Levis, David St. John and Peter Everwine. It is the latter who helped Levine to understand that the repetition of various motifs or "riffs" was not Levis' cannibalization of his poems, tearing phrases from the weaker to bolster the stronger, but in fact Levis' own conscious attempt to unify the book through those repetitions. (pp. ix-x)

In this paper I intend to begin an exploration of Levis' use of this repeated imagery to show how it does in fact not detract from but build layer upon layer of meaning with the repeated use of those motifs. Smith notes that "For Levis the essential poem is the narrative of awareness, its quality measurable, like a tree, by the rings of its layered resonance."<sup>2</sup> Part of that resonance is the resonance of its repeated images.

I will concentrate mainly on the poem "Elegy for Whatever had a Pattern in It," and more on the central image

of the spiderweb that appears in that poem than on any other, though it will be necessary, as well, to make comments on other poems and images, as well as on Levis' writing style and poetics. Commenting on the power of Levis' accomplishment, David St. John said: "To have a true sense of Levis' poems, one must imagine Rilke's elegies spoken not from the parapets of high Romanticism but from a dusty, heat-baked grape field in Levis' native Selma, Calif."<sup>3</sup> It is from that setting, and many others, that Levis' images emanate. Wojanh notes that "Favored motifs and images hauntedly recur in the writing; poems echo and comment upon one another; narratives and characters explored and dropped in one poem can emerge almost without warning in another."<sup>4</sup> But on a deeper level, we can see that what Levis did with his "riffs" is bound up in the very nature of elegy itself:

The motifs that unify Levis' poems, or "riffs" as Philip Levine calls them in his forward to *Elegy*, might also be thought of as refrains, a common elegiac device going all the way back to Orpheus, that impatient lyre-wielding mourner. In fact, song and grief share their mythic origins: Death, Stevens' "mother of beauty," is what inspires Orpheus to mourn Eurydice. Though Levis' riffs in "Pattern" owe less to Orpheus than John Coltrane, one is reminded throughout the poem of the ancient association of music and elegy. Take, for example, the following repeated phrases and words: "ring, & after ring, & echo" (three times), "We go without a trace, I am thinking" (twice), "All we are is representation, what we are & are not" (twice), "It magnifies & I can't explain it" (twice), "oblivion" (five times), "nothing" (seven times), "time" (eight times), and "web" (five times). In addition to riffs, Levis employs a chant-like "naming" technique. He lists the names of people now lost in the past: "Angel & Johnny Dominguez, Ediesto Huerta, / Jaime Vaca & Coronada Solares, Querido Fiacco. . . // And the one called Dead Rat & the one called Camelias; // We go without a trace, I am thinking." Levis also names lost places in the hope of keeping his memories of them alive: "Canal School with its three rooms, its bell & the rope you rang it with.../ Piedra, Conejo, Parlier. Stars & towns, blown fire & wind. / Deneb & Altair, invisible kindling, nothing above nothing." Such listing of lost people and places is common in elegy.<sup>5</sup>

Here, Journey is not only examining the riffs that echo across poems, but also within poems as well, here specifically in "Elegy for Whatever Had a Pattern in It," and ties the very practice to the nature of elegy in its attempt to recall and somehow call back to life what is already dead or past.

When reading *Elegy*, one cannot help but hear these echoes and be forced to go back to see where they came from. In this sense, the book is seemingly self-referential, a world unto itself. But in my own reading of Levis, I've also found he has certain verbal tics, a preference for certain words, for example, the rarely used word "sprawl," which goes back into earlier books, though it is repeated eight times in this volume if we also count the title of the poem "Elegy with the Sprawl of a Wave Inside It." In fact, if we look at the image of the wren in this book in "The Poem Returning as an Invisible Wren to the World," and to the one in "To a Wren on Calvary" from *The Widening Spell of the Leaves*, we see "these connective themes and tropes also flow across the covers

of previous collections, spilling forwards and backwards, informing and being informed by other poems from other works, much like separate poems that are variations on a theme.”<sup>6</sup>

Levis not only considered himself foremost a writer of elegies, but that it was something very much ingrained in his very nature as a man:

As early as 1982, when interviewed by David Wojahn, Levis responded to a question about whether he considered himself "principally an elegiac poet" with the following: "I often feel that that's what I am as a human . . . Also, it seems to me, or has seemed to me for a long time, that the elegiac poem, the poem that is meditative and narrative, simply touched me more deeply." Further into the same interview, when asked about "the purpose of elegiac writing," Levis offered a very revealing reply: "Merwin, for example, has a wonderful circumspection of mind and charity in a little poem called 'Elegy.' He says, 'who would I show it to?' which is, of course, the whole truth. Many times elegies are self-reflexive, and they often point not to the figure gone but to the person writing them, and they are meant to reveal that mind, that nature."<sup>7</sup>

Here then we have the contradictory nature of elegy: that while it seemingly attempts to honor what has already passed from existence, what is primarily revealed is the writer himself, Merwin's "who would I show it to?" So, as we examine the poems in *Elegy*, what we are primarily getting to know is the man who wrote them, or at least the persona behind the man. Yet that also would be too simplistic a view. As Smith points out in his examination of what a truly American poetry is, in which he places Levis squarely in the tradition of Whitman and Dickinson:

His vision evolved into a demanding, detailed, cohesive view of what Americans were as well as what they wanted to be. His poetry stands on understanding solidarity and complicity. He had the original and remarkable innocence that alone prevents any of us from being bullied into submission and, if we are poets, into imitation. His innocence came with the grit Emily Dickinson had. Like her, he knew the world for what it is, and he knew the true poet cannot blink.<sup>8</sup>

This is not to say that Levis is an American poet in the parochial sense. Just looking at the themes and subject matter of a few of the poems should keep us from thinking that: "Anastasia and Sandman," in which we see the peasants of Romania suffering under Stalin, and the kulaks who were executed by him; "Elegy with a Thimbleful of Water in the Cage," which meanders over various countries and times; and "Elegy with the Sound of a Skipping Rope," in which the central image is that of the characters on the worthless paper money of Serbia coming to life as the State itself collapses. While Levis may well have forged a distinctly new vision in American poetry, nationalistic limitations do not play a role, in this book at least.

Levis was also very eloquent about the writing process. In addition to the posthumous publication of *Elegy*, we are also very lucky to have *The Gazer Within*, a posthumous volume of his collected essays and lectures on writing. In it he points out that “to find a subject is also simultaneously and reflexively, the act and art by which anyone finds himself, or herself. A poet finds what he or she is by touching what is out there, finding the *real*.”<sup>9</sup> This is perhaps analogous to what I stated above about the elegy revealing more of the writer than of the object of the elegy. He goes on to say: “To really look inquiringly inward...is to discover how empty I am, how much an onlooker and a gazer I have to be in order to write poems. And if I am lucky, it is to find out how I can be filled enough by what is not me to use it, to have a subject, and, consequently, to find myself as a poet.”<sup>10</sup>

Levis placed great value on the setting of his poems, mostly landscapes, or dreamscapes, that are removed from the sterile suburbs, for to him, to be in an authentic landscape in which time can be seen and felt was necessary to engage in the imaginative act of poetry:

Yet the authentic experience of any worthwhile landscape must be an experience of my own humanity. When I pass fields or pass the deserted streets of a small town in the Midwest at supper time, or pass avenues of closed warehouses I am not alone, I think. Someone or something has lived here; some delicate linkage is preserved between past and present. I am filled by, *looked at* by, the landscape itself; the experience is not that of a mirror, but a true exchange, until even something as negligible as some newspapers lifting in the wind on a street, at night and before a rain, are somehow soiled by an ineradicable humanity, and by the presence of the dead, of the about to be born.<sup>11</sup>

Before I begin this preliminary examination of Levis’ use of repeated imagery, I feel I must first look at Levis’ concept of the image itself. Just what is it that Levis himself would call an authentic image? He writes:

Perhaps the Image, like a thing or an animal or a human, desires to be, to be eternally. The Image is like us, but it is not like us. It desires to constellate itself beyond us, and to live apart from us. It may or may not desire to fit into the fabric of the whole work of art, to be "organic" in *that* shopworn sense of the word. In truth, *we* pass, and the image becomes more moving to us because it remains and at the same time records something that passes.<sup>12</sup>

So, it is the image as a sort of eternal existence beyond time, yet taken from the temporal, that Levis aspired to create. Therefore, some of the most powerful images he leaves us are those of people, their names, places and their names, which “constitute a basic, even primal, lexicon in Larry's work.”<sup>13</sup> An example of this comes early in the book in “Photograph: Migrant Worker, Parlier, California, 1967”:

I'm going to put Johnny Dominguez right here  
In front of you on this page so that

You won't mistake him for something else,  
An idea, for example, of how oppressed  
He was, rising with his pan of Thompson Seedless  
Grapes from a row of vines. (p. 12)

In this poem, Levis pays homage to the dignity of a Hispanic field worker and tries to preserve his memory and being. To the writer, "elegies were matters of passion. By writing the names of the workers, this poet who excelled at elegy felt he was assuring these people that meant so much to him would not be forgotten."<sup>14</sup> But I believe it goes even further:

[Levis] memorializes the man in the photograph here just as he did the migrant workers on his father's ranch, like Ignacio Calderon, Ediesto Huerta, and Señor Solo, all of whom Larry mentions in his "Autobiography." He does this, not out of some vacuous impulse to tell us about his own life, but to point out that friendship is a numinous thing in this world and because, as Larry argues, "oblivion has no right to claim them without my respect, without their names written down, here and elsewhere."<sup>15</sup>

This idealization of farm workers is the rural equivalent of Levine's attempt to preserve the memory of factory workers that he worked with as a young man. It's an interesting corollary to the deep relationship that developed between these two contemporary giants of poetry, both bound up as they were in a deep moral commitment to the laborers who do the nation's work, to treat them not as abstractions, but as equals they knew and respected as friends, and whose memories they felt an obligation to preserve.

However, the image of the farm worker in the person of Johnny Dominguez in "Portrait" is repeated in the image we have of Ediesto Huerta in "Elegy for Whatever Had a Pattern in It." As I stated earlier, I am going to concentrate mainly on this poem because of the image of the spiderweb that develops in it, and which, to me, comes to symbolize the web of interconnectedness of so many other images in *Elegy*. However, one could, in fact, start with just about any poem and find himself eventually caught up in the web of all the images, all the poems.

In the "Pattern" poem we first see Huerta in much the same light that we saw Dominguez, though here he is swamping fruit (which means to move it out of an orchard into a protected area<sup>16</sup>), in this case, onto the bed of a truck:

I'm going to put the one largely forgotten, swaying figure of Ediesto Huerta

Right in front of you so you can watch him swamp fruit

Out of an orchard in the heat of an August afternoon, I'm going to let you

Keep your eyes on him as he lifts & swings fifty-pound boxes of late  
Elberta peaches up to me where I'm standing on a flatbed trailer & breathing in  
Tractor exhaust so thick it bends the air, bends things seen through it

So that they seem to swim through the air. (p 33)

He is a character larger than life who keeps on working even though he is later bitten by two black widow spiders and goes into a convulsive fit. Then the spiderwebs of those black widows expand into a darker image of the web of life we are all caught in (Ediesto himself is imprisoned later for some uncertain offense) and the web continues to expand:

In the story, no one can remember whether it was car theft or burglary,  
But in fact, Ediesto Huerta was tried & convicted of something, & so, afterward,  
Became motionless & silent in the web spun around him by misfortune.  
In the penitentiary the lights stay on forever,  
Cell after cell after cell, they call their names out, caught in time. (p. 37)

Yet before we even know that Huerta will be bitten by the spiders, Levis foreshadows the scene like this:

It is a lousy job, & no one has to do it, & we do it.

We do it so that I can show you even what isn't there,  
What's hidden. And signed by Time itself. And set spinning,

And is only a spider, after all, with its net waiting for what falls,  
For what flies into it, & ages, & turns gray in a matter of minutes. The web  
Is nothing's blueprint, bleached by the sun & whitened by it, it's what's left

After we've vanished, after we become what falls apart when anyone  
Touches it, eyelash & collarbone dissolving into air, & time touching  
The boxes we are wrapped in like gifts & splintering them

Into wood again, at the edge of a wood. (p. 33)

Later in the poem, again, before we know Huerta will be bitten, he writes:

Expressionless spinster, carrying Time's signature preserved & signed  
In blood & hidden beneath you, you move two steps

To the right & hold still, then one step to the left,

And hold still again, motionless as the web you wait in.

Motionless as the story you wait in & inhabit but did not spin

And did not repeat. You wait in the beehive hairdo of the girl

Sitting across from me in class, wait in your eggs, (p. 35)

In these instances we can see that the spiderweb becomes an image of time itself, one of the larger themes in the book, in any elegy for that matter. And he uses it to good effect to move back in time to when he was in a schoolhouse as a child. In fact, this moving back and forth in time, moving between scenes almost unrelated to each other, is a very pronounced trait in Levis, effected many times through the intervention of the image. His discursive style is his way of trying to talk about anything and not be bound by time or setting, all the while deftly moving from scene to scene, sometimes as he moves from line to line. Osherow notes: "...despite quite a bit of dead-pan humor and a recurring air of self-mockery, it's a heartbreaking book. [...] I'm moved by the lyric discursiveness. It enables him to achieve an astonishing scope, simultaneously suggesting and quelling persistent doubts about the lyric enterprise itself."<sup>17</sup>

Let me give a more concrete example from the poem that illustrates Levis' discursive style, and how the image becomes the springboard for the seemingly random jumping from scene to scene:

After the male dies she goes off & the eggs

Live in the fraying sail

Of an abandoned web strung up in the corner of a picking box or beneath

Some slowly yellowing grape leaf among hundreds of other

Leaves, in autumn, the eggs smaller than the o in this typescript

Or a handwritten apostrophe in ink.

What do they represent but emptiness, some gold camp settlement

In the Sierras swept clean by smallpox, & wind?

Canal School with its three rooms, its bell & the rope you rang it with

And no one there in the empty sunlight, ring & after ring & echo.

It magnifies & I can't explain it.

Piedra, Conejo, Parlier. Stars & towns, blown fire & wind.

Deneb & Altair, invisible kindling, nothing above nothing.

It magnifies & I can't explain it. (p. 34)

He starts by describing the cannibalistic nature of the black widow mating ritual, goes into philosophical speculation on emptiness, then on to his school room where the bell continually rings in memory. This is a bit dizzying, but that is the train of Levis' imagery, or how the image is the vehicle on which he takes us along on this journey.

On the first page of "Elegy for Whatever Had a Pattern in It," we are immediately reminded of the second poem in the book, "In 1967," with its themes of war and senseless death, with this line: "Now that the Summer of Love has become the moss of tunnels." In the earlier poem, we have:

As the summer went on, some were drafted, some enlisted  
In a generation that would not stop falling, a generation  
Of leaves sticking to body bags, & when they turned them  
Over, they floated back to us on television, even then,  
In the Summer of Love, in 1967,  
When riot police waited beyond the doors of perception,  
And the best thing one could do was get arrested. (p. 6)

"In 1967" is a powerful poem that recalls his youth working on his father's grape orchard, even on the day after he "dropped mescaline," and thus went about his work in a mock holy frame of mind. It recalls the whole era of the Vietnam War, what it was like to grow up at that time, caught in the political web of American culture, and how drugs were one way youth had to try to find answers for the chaos of those times, or simply to escape. We find a similar drug image in the "Pattern" elegy as well, though while it was mescaline in the earlier poem, it is LSD (acid) in this poem, imbued with a more dangerous aura since the poet links the image of the pirate on the paper acid to that of the hourglass on the black widow's belly:

Black Widow is a name no one ever tinkered with or tried to change.  
If you turn her on her back you can see the blood red hourglass figure

She carries on her belly,

Small as the design of a pirate I saw once on a tab of blotter acid

Before I took half of it, & a friend took the other, & then the two of us  
Walked down to the empty post office beside the lake to look,



For some reason, at the wanted posters. We liked a little drama  
In the ordinary then. Now a spider's enough. (pp. 33-34)

The repetition of “the Summer of Love” in both poems joins them in memory and psychology, though in the “Pattern” poem, time has obviously passed. By taking “...the tab of blotter acid,” in the “Pattern” poem, Levis again connects us to “In 1967” with its taking of mescaline. It is obvious that he wants us to see the connections between the poems, how one grows out of the other, or how one consciousness grew out of and informs the other.

In “The Cook Grew Lost in His Village, the Village in the Endless Shuffling of Their Cards,” coming before the “Pattern” poem, we can also see the image of the spiderweb, with its dark foreshadowing building before we get to the latter poem:

And when he begins to see, with his eyes still closed,  
The two thin spiderwebs glistening with frost & trembling  
In the eaves above him, his lips are already whispering a prayer,” (p. 20)

Before these lines the cook has been thinking about a young girl who is dying (probably from tuberculosis) and coughing up blood on her pillow. When we get to the spiderwebs here, there is a slightly sinister feel about the image. And what we do not yet know in the poem is that we will be watching as the cook dies in slow motion right before our eyes, that in fact, when he does die, he won't even know if for some time.

In another earlier poem, “Anastasia and Sandman,” Levis also used spiderwebs, or webs, in this instance, focusing more on the web of time:

Old contrivers, daydreamers, walking chemistry sets,  
Exhausted chimneysweeps of the spaces  
Between words, where the Holy Ghost tastes just  
Like the dust it is made of,  
Let's tear up our lecture notes & throw them out  
The window.  
Let's do it right now before wisdom descends upon us  
Like a spiderweb over a burned-out theater marquee ,  
Because what's the use? (p. 10)

What the speaker is demanding is that those in power give up artifice and pretense for what is real before time and death claim them all. The spiderweb here comes to symbolize the hold established ideas and theories have over us. Fenza described it in greater detail:

Although Levis was aware of the various parties of literary theory, politics, criticism, and poetry, and although he stole what was useful to him from all of them, he was against trendiness, sophistry, pretense, and any lofty ideology that would dissipate our humanity and the beauty of down-to-earth things. The poem "Anastasia and Sandman," in his last book, *Elegy*, suggests his weariness with the posturing and the wanton promulgation of new ideas. The poem is framed by a mockery of what may be either a political inquiry or an academic committee meeting.<sup>18</sup>

Now that spiderwebs have brought us to "Anastasia and Sandman," I would like to comment on that poem a bit more. The names in the title are those of two old horses, horses that obviously come from Levis' past, and reappear in the poems again. They are named in "Elegy with the Sprawl of a Wave Inside It" and "Elegy with a Bridle in Its Hand" (which Smith likens to the power of James Wright's "A Blessing"<sup>19</sup>) and unnamed as images of horses only in "Elegy with a Chimneysweep Falling Inside It" and in the final, climactic poem in the volume, "Elegy Ending in the Sound of a Skipping Rope." Levis spends a great deal of time using the images of these horses, and also used the image of the wren ("The Poem Returning as an Invisible Wren to the World"). Obviously, the spider has also figured greatly in the volume. Why did Levis spend so much time on animal imagery? Well, it has a lot to do with how he imagines himself into a poem. In his own words:

Animals are objects of contemplation, but they are also, unlike us, without speech, without language, except in their own instinctual systems. When animals occur in poems, then, I believe they are often emblems for the muteness of the poet, for what he or she cannot express, for what is deepest and sometimes most antisocial in the poet's nature. The other thing that occurs infallibly when the poet places the animal in the world, or in the world of the poem, is the recovery of the landscape. It is no longer a world without imagination, or the world of tract housing beyond time. In animal poems the fox may live in the yellowing wood behind the service station; the hawk may be above the billboard. But if they are there, so is time there.

[...]

What interests me is what the choice of such muteness suggests or openly testifies about poetry, and about the role of the poet. Seemingly, the poem sustains a paradox: the poet is speaker, of course, and yet the poet, evading the pressure of reality by a contemplation of the animal, also desires to express a mute condition. The poet wants to speak of, or to, or through, what is essentially so other that it cannot speak. The muteness or silence of the animal equals that of the poet.<sup>20</sup>

Levis wrote this long before he died, yet his poetics is clearly evidenced in the poems. The horses Anastasia and Sandman are used to center us in a world of passing time, a world decaying before our eyes, and yet that much realer for it. They symbolize all that flesh can suffer on the earth, and at the same time symbolize beauty, or what was once beautiful, caught in the web of time. They recover the landscape and make it available for

the imagination. And as the web of time, society, small-mindedness, pretentious scholarship—even the web of a black widow spider—has its hold over us, it is through the eyes of the animal, that mute feeling flesh like our own, that we may be redeemed.

Yet no matter what we might say, *Elegy* is a dark book. It is hard not to feel that way, no matter how uplifting some of its poems, or sections of poems, might be. David St. John said the book “is fragrant with death. Its meditations lift us into realms -- some real, some imagined -- that grow increasingly harrowing.”<sup>21</sup> Philip Levine probably knew Levis better than anyone, yet theirs was a professional relationship, so he rarely intruded into the darker side of his friend. When asked about that dark side, he said:

I never questioned where his poems were going, and why, for example, in the last two books they got as dark as they got. They got very dark. Something crawled in there that suggested desperation, hopelessness. Sometimes, you could almost say, even a sense of worthlessness. Because that wasn't evident when I was with him—he was a very upbeat guy—so it was . . . it was a little surprising to find that in the poetry. But I never questioned it. He was a pro, he knew what he was doing, that's what he wanted to say; it wasn't mine to say be more cheerful, for example. We were living in an ugly world, and the older we got, the more aware of it.<sup>22</sup>

As I stated earlier, this is only the beginning of an inquiry into the use of repeated imagery, motifs or “riffs” that Levis wove through *Elegy*, and I have barely scratched the surface, yet we can see it is not just the repeated phrases Levis employs, which stand out more readily, but the more subtle repeated use of images and that ties poems to each other and to other images, so that all is caught up in the web of his creation. I have not even begun to talk about his use of the image of angels, which appears twenty-six times in the book, if you include the title of the poem “Elegy with an Angel at its Gate.”

Yet one thing is clear: Levis was a man so imbued with the idea of mortality that it is hard to imagine he did not see his own premature death coming, and then sprint all the way to the end of the volume. Or could it be that the very act of writing so many elegies to the depths that he wrote hastened his own death? On the process of writing elegies, he wrote:

The elegy always involves another, and the poet, working in his elegy toward what he expects to be catharsis and release, sometimes finds them only at the cost of being accused and reprimanded by the being whom he has turned into a figure, into a literary convention which, by its own definition, has little alternative but to falsify the life and death it preys upon. "Little alternative" because it exists in words and because, as we are by now tired of hearing, words transform experience more than they record it.

[...]

Aren't the guilt and anxiety a poet or anyone else experiences more akin to the remorse and guilt

of the survivor?

[...]

For the sin of the survivor, poet or not, sometimes consists simply in still being alive at all.

The poet's sin is compounded by the very act of writing an elegy. If elegies exist primarily as a way of completing the process of grief, mourning, and consolation, they are then involved in processes all people have in common, processes that are private.<sup>23</sup>

In an email from Dave Smith, whose papers I quoted earlier in this paper, he told me that there are plans for a new edition of *Elegy*, one including more of the poems that Levine originally left out. As someone who came to the poetry of Larry Levis long after his death, someone still in a belated state of grief over his loss, I can only say that I eagerly await that new volume.

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## Larry Levis の『Elegy (哀歌)』：イメージはここで終わらない

スティーブン・トスカー

抄録：1996年、Larry Levisの49歳での早すぎる死は、詩壇に大きな衝撃を与えた。死後に公刊された彼の最後の詩集『Elegy (哀歌)』は、積年の友であり、またよき助言者でもあった Philip Levine の編によるもので、感動的なまでの《力》をもつ作品である。互いに反応し合いながら詩集全篇にさらに強力な効果を与えている多彩なイメージ、それらが織りなされることにより、この《力》の一部が生みだされている。本論文では、おもに「Elegy for Whatever Had a Pattern in It (パターンをもつすべてのもののための哀歌)」という作品中においてとりわけはっきりと歌われている蜘蛛の網巢のイメージの用いられ方に焦点をあて、そのイメージが本書の他の詩においていかに繰り返されているか、そしてそれゆえ他の詩のイメージが、反復され強化されたイメージの網の中にいかに描かれているかということを示したい。本論文はあくまで序説であり、『Elegy (哀歌)』において Levis が用いたイメージのすべてを扱うものではない。