

THREE SILENT DIAMONDS

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Larry Levis's skill was an equal match for his audacity. His brash willingness to sidle up to the Romantic, Modernist, and Surrealist masters and fashion a new poetic idiom that was an amalgam of their respective stylistic and thematic premises, as well as of his own particularly late twentieth century temperament, will ultimately ensure his privileged place in North American poetry. Five after his untimely death at forty-nine, two new books allow readers to assess Levis's achievement: *The Selected Levis*, edited by David St. John, contains a judicious selection of the five books published during his lifetime; while *The Gazer Within* collects all of his major essays and one lengthy interview with David Wojahn.¹ (The 2003 revised edition of *The Selected Levis* contains a selection from the posthumously published *Elegy*.) These selections demonstrate how inextricable the triumph of Levis's best writing is from his readiness to hazard the failure of the tremendous technical and existential risks undertaken in his work as a whole.

The Selected Levis wisely favors Levis's mature poems over his earlier work: half of the book is assembled from *Winter Stars* and *The Widening Spell of the Leaves*, the last—and best—books published before his death. Devoted Levis readers will no doubt quibble over omissions (I particularly miss "South" and "Nature"), but St. John's selection provides a useful sense of Levis's trajectory up to

472 the early 1990s. *The Gazer Within* confirms that Levis was as fine a prose writer as he was a poet. There are a number of meaty statements on poetics here, which hash out aesthetic issues important both to Levis's work and to twentieth century North American poetry in general, as well as memoirs of his friendships with Zbigniew Herbert and Philip Levine. (The omission of Levis's essay "War as Parable and War as Fact: Zbigniew Herbert and Carolyn Forché" is puzzling, since the essay presumably helps to articulate Levis's vision of the intersections of politics and poetry.) The best work in the book, however, concerns *place*: a lengthy autobiographical sketch contains a loving evocation of Levis's childhood on a farm in California's San Joaquin Valley, an aspect of his life that is essential to his poems; while "Oaxaca and the Politics of Looking," which deserves to stand beside D.H. Lawrence's travel writing, is simultaneously an excellent travel essay, a compelling aesthetic statement, and a useful gloss on *The Widening Spell of the Leaves's* knot-tier poems.

David St. John's selections from Levis's first two books, *Wrecking Crew* and *The Afterlife*, evidence the extent of Levis's early immersion in the dominant trend of the mid to late '60s—namely the terse, image-based poetry of such poets as Robert Bly, W.S. Merwin, and James Wright. There is, unfortunately, little to admire in these apprentice poems. Those in his first book, especially, are textbook examples of what Robert Pinsky calls "one-of-the-guys surrealism"²—hard-boiled, tight-lipped, imagistic poems with haphazard enjambment and little prosodic flair, which cast a cool eye on American decay: "The go-go girl yawns. / ...[H]er eyes are flat / and still as thumbprints, or / the dead presidents / pressed into coins"; or, "I'm so tame and still / I could be a tiny, plastic / skull left on the // dashboard of a junked car." Such images are overly facile, with none of the bare grandeur and seeming inevitability of the poems by Merwin and Wright they clearly emulate; instead, these early poems end up reading like a clumsy hybrid of Raymond Chandler and Merwin's *The Lice*. *The Afterlife* fares somewhat better more than twenty years later, possibly because of the direct influence of South American and Spanish poets such as Cesar Vallejo and Miguel Hernández on Levis. Under the great Surrealists' tute-

lage, Levis moves away from hipness and inscrutability in his use of images to a deeper sense of stillness and mystery, especially in the longer sequence "Linnets." Still, the main interest this second book holds is its anticipation of Levis's further development, as in these lines from "Rhododendrons": "I want to be circular; / a pond or column of smoke / revolving, slowly, its ashes." Here, Levis presages his own later poetry, which moves away from the static image into increasingly "circular" narrative and meditative forms, whose appeal lies in the unruffled, almost disinterested quality of the poet's "revolving" imagination.

In the essay "Eden and My Generation," Levis articulates his own turning away from the style of his American progenitors: "The problem of that poetic stance was, unfortunately, its real power—its irresistibly attractive, usually imagistic surface. So many young poets, responding honestly to the work of Bly, Wright, Snyder, Plath, Stafford, or Merwin, tended to write poems that looked stylistically imitative, even derivative of those and of other poets. That imitative gesture began to feel faint, inauthentic, often simply insincere or naïve. And finally, as if in despair of recreating the reality of prior visions, this poetry often took on a sarcastic or sardonic attitude towards experience." There is much to admire in Levis's implicit critique of his own early work, especially its unerring accuracy; it is precisely this mordantly "sardonic attitude" that makes his early poems so unmemorable. By Levis's third book, *The Dollmaker's Ghost*, the primary elements of his mature work are at least nascent: a meditative stance, the use of discursive as well as descriptive language, poems of much greater length, use of narrative strategies, and a more sophisticated sense of prosody. Finally, one of Levis's great subjects is fully introduced: his upbringing "in a place that seemed to exist, the fields and vineyards and even the sky over it all, in some motionless and unchanging moment" and a concomitant grappling with his parents' lives and identities. The figure of the father, who "[l]ived out his one life / Farming two hundred acres of gray Málaga vines / And peach trees twisted / By winter," is genuinely compelling, as is the speaker's urgent inability to understand him.

As its title indicates, many of the speakers in Levis's third book are ghosts. This narrative strategy—subsequently, and wisely, abandoned—ushers in the relentlessly elegiac stance and tone of his mature work. Asked by Wojahn whether he “consider[s] himself to be primarily an elegiac poet,” Levis replies, “I often feel that’s what I *am* as a human,” and *Winter Stars* and *The Widening Spell of the Leaves*, the books in which Levis comes into his own, bear out this contention. The former volume’s strongest poems are a sequence in memory of the speaker’s father, but all of Levis’s poems from this point on are infused by a sense of loss and mourning—for the speaker’s childhood, marriage, and past love affairs—which widens beyond the individual speaker’s singularity to a confrontation with what one poem calls “the swirl & vortex of history.” “The Assimilation of the Gypsies,” like a number of the poems in *Winter Stars*, uses a photograph by Czech photographer Josef Koudelka as a springboard; in a 1990 interview with Leslie Kelen, omitted from *The Gazer Within*, Levis glosses the poem’s historical context: “[It] has to do with the policy of the Soviet officials in Slovakia who wished to break down the roving bands of gypsies and to assimilate them within the larger socialist structures of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and other countries throughout Eastern Europe. But how do you assimilate a people into another group? Well, one of the things you can do is have people within that particular gypsy tribe kill members of their own tribe, perform executions. In so doing, you have prima facie evidence of their repudiation of it. Therefore, afterward, a particular vulnerability to assimilation by other social forces develops.”³ In this passage we can see the confluence of elegy, narrative, and political-historical meditation in Levis’s mature work:

turning his head
 First to one side, then to the other,
 He lets them slip the blindfold over his eyes
 And secure it with an old gentleness
 They have shared
 Since birth. And perhaps at this moment
 All three of them remember slipping light scarves,
 Fashioned into halters,
 Over the muzzles of horses, & the quickness of horses.

And if the boy has forgiven them in advance
 By such a slight gesture, this turning of his head,
 It is because he knows, as they do, too,
 Not only that terror is state
 Of complete understanding, but also that
 In a few years, this whole village, with its cockeyed
 Shacks, tea leaves, promiscuity between cousins,
 Idle horse thieves, & pale lilacs used
 To cure the insane,
 Will be gone—bulldozed away so that the land
 Will lie black and fallow and without history.

This passage displays the risky and idiosyncratic strengths of Levis's best poems: an exquisite sense of pacing in the preponderance of punctuation and the juxtaposition of short and long lines, a novelist's ability to create vivid, memorable characters and setting, and a gift for grounding his poems' historical and cultural sweep in a genuine intimacy of address. ("I do not wish to interfere, Reader, with your solitude— / So different from my own," he writes in "Sensationalism," sounding improbably like an amalgam of Charlotte Brontë and the epistolary Rilke.) The historical situation at hand is brought alive by the precise, intimate details of this moment just before the shooting: "such a slight gesture, the turning of his head," or the men's shared memories of "the quickness of horses," for instance, somehow contain a great deal about the passing of an entire people.

What Levis is attempting to embody and encompass in this elegiac poem could easily fall flat; that it doesn't—in spite of the dubious, punning assertion that "terror is a state / Of complete understanding," and the perhaps over-romanticized details of the gypsy village—is evidence of his willingness to take substantive risks in his poetry. Taken out of context, many of the poems' rhetorical declarations, such as "The naked human body is the grave in blossom," or "Perhaps the ankle of a horse is holy," seem merely bombastic or inane; and occasionally their narrative language becomes too prose-like. (The poet Jim Powell's response to the latter line is an eloquent counterweight to my dismissal of it: "Nothing more holy than the ankle of a horse, a ray of sunset lancing a

breaker's foaming crest, a steel spike wrenched awry under the hammer blow of the hydraulic ram.... The sacred as an angle of vision, a vantage."⁴) I am inclined, however, to see his best poems' shortcomings as integral to their ambition. In the Wojahn interview Levis asserts, "I don't want to be a 'professional' and just write competent poems.... I may fail, but that's all right"; on the evidence of his poems, Levis's determination to transcend mere proficiency was no less than that of Keats, who responded to criticisms of his early poem *Endymion* by retorting, "I was never afraid of failure; for I would rather fail than not be among the greatest—"⁵ If Levis is not ultimately counted "among the greatest" of his century—although I believe he will be—it will not have been for lack of a willingness to constantly test the limits of his powers.

In his afterword to *The Selected Levis*, David St. John claims that "[t]o have a true sense of Larry Levis's...mature work, one must try to imagine Rilke's great 'Duino Elegies' spoken not from the parapets of high Romanticism but from a dusty, heat-baked grape field in Levis's native Selma, California." The tone of Levis's best work consciously echoes Rilke in its casual-seeming combination of grandeur and intimacy; what differentiates his meditative stance from Rilke's is the extent to which it is defined by vividly imagined people and the subject of human history's embodiment in landscape. For Levis, Rilke's longed-for "human place, our own small strip of fertile soil"⁶ is an *actual* place, made vivid by human relationships and struggle. Levis's attempt to evoke, in poetry and prose, the Mexican-Americans alongside of whom he worked as a child is one of the most moving aspects of his best work. "That land!" he writes in his autobiographical sketch: "It was a kind of paradise preserved, held intact, by the toxic perfume of malathion and sulfur, insecticide sprays, fertilizers, and by the people who worked on it, who were Mexican if they were older, Chicano if younger, who spoke Spanish mostly, and who were underpaid. Many of them lived in poverty and the intermittent misery of unemployment.... 'They' were not a 'they' to me. They were men I worked with in orchards and vineyards.... I'm sure I idealize them. But oblivion has no right to claim them without my respect, without their names written down, here and elsewhere." Levis's early alle-

giance to the Mexican-Americans he writes of here seems to have fueled what St. John characterizes as his “championing of those at the margins of society—migrant workers, the dispossessed, a variety of spiritual transients.” This aspect of his poems, which are everywhere characterized by the tonal equivalent of “the ironic, / “Rueful smile of a peasant who’s extinct,” goes a long way towards establishing the compelling authenticity of Levis’s mature poetic voice.

Another great leap forward in *Winter Stars* and *The Widening Spell of the Leaves* is Levis’s rewardingly complicated use of image and figurative language. Here is one of my favorite passages, from “The Cry”:

I went downstairs, then, to the room
 Where my mother & father slept with nothing on, & the
 pale light
 Shone through the window on the candor
 Of their bodies strewn over the sheets, & those bodies
 Were not beautiful, like distant cities.
 They were real bodies
 With bruises & lattices of fatigue over their white stomachs,
 And over their faces.
 His hair was black, & thinning. Hers was the color of ashes.
 I could see every detail that disappointment had sketched,
 Idly, into them: her breasts & the widening thigh
 That mocked my mother with the intricate,
 Sorrowing spasm of birth;
 I could see
 The stooped shoulders & sunken chest of my father
 Sullen as the shape of a hawk in wet weather,
 The same shape it takes in death,
 When you hold it in your outstretched hand,
 And wonder how it can shrink to so small a thing,
 And then you are almost afraid, judging by the truculence
 Of its beak & the vast, intricate plan
 Of its color & delicate shading, black & red & white,
 That it is only sleeping,
 Only pretending a death.
 But both of them really unlike anything else
 Unless you thought, as I did,

Of the shape of beaten snow, & absence, & a sleep
Without laughter.

What I find so exciting in these lines is the tension between the “pure” image or *Ding an sich*, and the figurative language’s imaginative spiraling. There is a careful and loving attempt here on the part of the speaker *not* to stray into idealization or metaphor in describing his parents’ “real bodies”; at the same time, this attempt is consistently undermined by the impulse to perceive their bodies imaginatively—and thus transform them. I love the personification of “disappointment,” and especially the adverb “idly,” which manages somehow to evoke the grinding hardship undergone by the parents in the face of their hopes’ disappearance. It is in the extended comparison of the father’s chest to a hawk, however, that the passage really takes off; the reason for this is the extent to which the reader gets caught up in the simile, almost to the exclusion of its original object. “Here is... a simile,” writes Tony Hoagland, “so lush and commanding it makes you forget it is a simile. But is it a flight or an arrival?”⁷ The answer, of course, is both. The parents’ bodies—behind which lies, for the child, the mystery of their identities—are “unlike anything else,” while at the same time they conjure “distant cities,” “the shape of a hawk in wet weather,” and “beaten snow.”

In this context, it is difficult not to be reminded of Wallace Stevens’s fundamental concern with the interplay and conflict between imaginative perception and “the pressure of reality”; indeed, Levis himself returns to the latter term of Stevens’s throughout his essays. In “Some Notes on the Gazer Within,” he articulates his vision of poetry as “the attempt of the imagination to inhabit nature and by that act preserve itself for as long as it possibly can against ‘the pressure of reality.’ And by ‘nature’ I mean any wilderness, inner or outer. The moment of writing is not an escape, however; it is only an insistence, through the imagination, upon human ecstasy, and a reminder that such ecstasy remains as much a birthright in this world as misery remains a condition of it.” The debt that this passage owes to Stevens is manifest; it also sounds like something out of *Biographia Literaria*, and the best of Levis’s work is

also a dialogue with the British Romantics. Some of his most eloquent writing on the workings of the imagination in childhood—that great Romantic subject—can be found in the essay “Oaxaca and the Politics of Looking:”

[C]olor itself has a good deal to do with the secret of Oaxaca. And that secret has something even greater to do with childhood. It seems that colors were brighter, deeper, more various in hue and shading when I was a child, and this is the way they still are in Oaxaca. It is as if color itself, along with the city, has not quite grown up; certainly it has not grown old. In fact, it seems as if colors have remained in an earlier phase of childhood, a time in which awe and wonder were more present. The trouble with adulthood is that few of us can stand much awe and wonder for long. It reminds us, too often, of our distance it, our necessary separation from the way things once were. . . . Color in Oaxaca has nothing to do with travel posters. I think of the hundreds of flies blackening the fresh red meat in the *mercado*, of the bees making the halves of squash yellow as they swarmed over them until it was hard to distinguish bees from the flesh of the squash. I think of the intricately woven blankets and shawls in which the Indians much have decided to send all colors to school to discipline them—the strict rows of color waiting for some final unraveling, and the blankets hanging there by the hundreds, each one a little different from the next. In childhood, all colors are indelible; they cannot be washed out. It is true that sometimes, in the bitter compromises of adult life, we think the truth of childhood is tiny; it is immense.

One of the projects of Levis’s mature poetry is to is to try and “stand [as] much awe and wonder” as possible—“not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth,” as Wordsworth writes, “but hearing oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity.” What differentiates his vision of adulthood from Wordsworth’s is not just his acknowledgement of its “bitter compromises,” but also his forthrightness about human cruelty. A half-buried subject of many of his later poems is a father’s abandonment of his son: “And quietly I

480 went in to make sure he was still sleeping, & he was, although / I think now I went in just to see him there, & also because in a few hours / I would have to leave him forever, & because by that time I would need // To acquire the tact & decency to explain it all to him. And resist lying." In "Slow Child with a Book of Birds," Coleridge is summoned as a touchstone for Levis's forthright and almost tender vision—characterized indeed by a fundamental "tact & decency"—of brutality:

Coleridge at
The rail of a ship sailing back
From Malta—his mind surveying
Itself, the hushed, broken toys it carried
Home in a private ridicule & shame,
Watching as two sailors from America
Tortured a pelican on deck by tossing
Scraps to it, then flailed it with sticks
When it tried to eat.... Coleridge saw
The world to come.

Another aspect of Levis's reckoning with the Romantics is his later poems' expert modulation in and out of a Wordsworthian blank verse, as in the opening of "Irish Music":

Now in middle age, my blood like a thief who
Got away, unslain, & the trees hung again in the grim,
Cheap embroidery of the leaves, I come back to the white roads,
The intersections in their sleeves of dust,
And vines like woodwinds twisted into shapes
For playing different kinds of silence.
Just when my hearing was getting perfect, singular
As an orphan's shard of mirror, they
Change the music into something I
No longer follow.

The beginning of this passage habituates the reader's ear to a five—and six-beat line before slipping, in lines four through six, almost unnoticeably into a limpid pentameter whose stresses are skillfully embedded in multi-syllabic words such as "intersections." The metrical pattern that is established "[j]ust when" the speaker's "hear-

ing [is] getting perfect” then falls back, in lines seven through ten, into a six-, then finally into a descending two- to four-beat line at the same time that “they / Change the music into something [he] / No longer follow[s].” This prosodic enactment of the poem’s subject matter is a hallmark of Levis’s work from *Winter Stars* onward, where a fruitful interplay between metrical and free verse provides a rhythmic backbone to poems whose often prose-like language might otherwise go slack. In the Kelen interview Levis comments, “I was consciously writing a rather traditional five-beat line against some of the free verse in [*Winter Stars*]. But I wanted it to remain unnoticeable; I wanted the rhythm to work unconsciously. What intrigued me was coming back to a very traditional poetic source, while at the same time involving myself in narrative.” Levis brilliantly exploits this tension in many of his best poems, which harken back to the music of *The Prelude* without having to dispense with the variant line-lengths of Whitman and Jeffers. In a practical sense, this metrical underpinning helps to keep the movement of such longer poems as “Slow Child with a Book of Birds” and “The Widening Spell of the Leaves” fluid. The latter is a wide ranging *tour de force* of almost three hundred three- to six-beat lines, whose subject matter is—typically—difficult to pin down. The poem winds back and forth between remote Central Europe in 1968 and 1940s California, as it narrates both a hazardous trek through a land of “[w]ind, leaves, goats, the higher passes / Locked in stone, the peasants with their fate / Embroidering a stillness into them” and the story of a Japanese-American photographer sent “[t]o a place called Manzanar, a detention camp / Hidden in stunted pines almost above / The Sierra timberline.” The poem is more or less “about” the speaker’s sudden, feverish remembrance of discovering his artistic vocation as a child while looking at a tree-filled park (although such a synopsis is horribly reductive). Here is its conclusion:

Before my fever broke,
And the pains lessened, I could actually see
Myself, in the exact center of that square.
How still it had become in my absence, & how
Immaculate, windless, sunlit. I could see

The outline of every leaf on the nearest tree,
 See it more clearly than ever, more clearly than
 I had seen anything before in my whole life:
 Against the modest, dark gray, solemn trunk,
 The leaves were becoming only what they had to be—
 Calm, yellow, things in themselves & nothing
 More—& frankly they were nothing in themselves,
 Nothing except their little reassurance
 Of persisting for a few more days, or returning
 The year after, & the year after that, & every
 Year following—estranged from us by now—& clear,
 So clear not one in a thousand trembled; hushed
 And always coming back—steadfast, orderly,
 Taciturn, oblivious—until the end of Time.

This passage, which gradually resolves itself into pentameter, owes much of its grandeur to Levis's skillful and almost unnoticeable reliance on a metrical foundation.

The clarity and stillness of these trees and the speaker's vision of them, and finally of the reader's experience of the poem, cannot be ascribed solely to Levis's technical facility. "I did not / know childhood was a spell," he writes earlier in this poem which, like all his best poems, enacts the "revolving," incantatory unwinding pre-saged in "Rhododendrons"; this is one reason they are so difficult to excerpt. It is not, however, the poems' ostensible subjects or techniques that ultimately matter, but something more impalpable—Tony Hoagland's characterization of which cannot be bettered: "Finally, it might be best to speak in terms of ambience: the feeling one has is of their exploratoriness, presided over throughout by an enormous calm. The reader is swept along, through the elaborate, elaborating corridors and currents of the dream.... If you want to say that his muse was the end of his life, I would say that it was the stillness of the self which he sought, and explored, for it is in that cessation that the point of real contact with both reality and eternity takes place." The ultimate worth of Levis's work must be measured by the integrity of its spiritual endeavor—its intimacy with what Eliot famously calls "the still point of the turning world"—as much as on aesthetic grounds. "And do not call it fixity," Eliot continues, and the calmness at the heart of Levis's mature work is

as far as possible from the inert image-making of his first poems; it is both the tumult of a “swirl & vortex” and “a complete stillness of yellow leaves filling / A wide field” within and around the self. What use is it to try and elucidate what the best of his poems and prose achieve so effortlessly? *The Selected Levis* and *The Gazer Within* contain the bulk of a life’s work to which readers will no doubt return for years to come. *Winter Stars*’s “Adolescence” tells the story of a doomed “girl who loved me; and whom I did not love” when both were teenagers, whose father, “a gambler & horse dealer . . . wept openly / The day she was buried,” and who himself “died, a year later,” playing cards “in a Sierra lumber camp”; the benediction that ends the poem embodies the hard-won confluence of mystery and utter transparency at the center of Larry Levis’s work:

Soon, the snows will come again & cover that place
Where he sat at a wobbling card table underneath
A Ponderosa pine, & cover
Even the three cards he dropped there, three silent diamonds,
And cover everything in the Sierras, & make my meaning plain.

Notes

1. Larry Levis, *The Selected Levis*, ed. and with an afterword by David St. John (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000; revised, expanded edition, 2003); Larry Levis, *The Gazer Within*, ed. James Marshall, Andrew Miller, and John Venable, with the assistance of Mary Flinn, and with a foreword by David St. John (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).
2. Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 163.
3. Leslie Kelen, “After the Obsession with Some Beloved Figure: An Interview with Larry Levis,” *Antioch Review* 48 (1990).
4. Jim Powell, e-mail to author, March 9th, 2001.
5. John Keats, *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gidding (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 156.
6. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. Edward Snow (New York: North Point Press, 2000), p. 15.
7. Tony Hoagland, “‘Let’s Get Lost’: The Image as Escape in the Poems of Larry Levis,” *The Marlboro Review* 3 (Winter/Spring 1997).