

So Ask

Philip Levine

So Ask

ESSAYS,
CONVERSATIONS,
AND INTERVIEWS

Ann Arbor

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS

Copyright © by the University of Michigan 2002
All rights reserved
Published in the United States of America by
The University of Michigan Press
Manufactured in the United States of America
⊗ Printed on acid-free paper

2005 2004 2003 2002 4 3 2 1

No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form
or by any means, electronic, mechanical, or otherwise,
without the written permission of the publisher.

A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Levine, Philip, 1928—

So ask : essays, conversations, and interviews / Philip Levine.

p. cm. — (Poets on poetry)

ISBN 0-472-09420-3 (cloth : alk. paper) —

ISBN 0-472-06420-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Levine, Philip, 1928—Interviews. 2. Poets, American—
20th century—Interviews. 3. Poetry—Authorship.
4. Poetics. I. Title. II. Series.

PS3562.E9 Z475 2002

811'.54—dc21

[B]

2002020293

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to these publications for permission to reprint the following
material:

American Poet, "Interview with Edward Hirsch," 1999; "Larry Levis,"

1996. *Atlantic Unbound*, "Interview with Wen Stephenson," 1999.

DoubleTake, "On First Looking into John Keats' Letters," 1998.

Image, "Interview with Paul Mariani," 1996. *Manoa*, "Neruda y Yo,"

1991. *Michigan Quarterly Review*, "Two Journeys," 1997. *Missouri*

Review, "Craft Non-Lecture," 1987. *The Threepenny Review*, "Beauty

and/or Truth," 1994. *Tri-Quarterly*, "Conversation with Harry

Thomas's English Class, Davidson College," 1995. *Vanderbilt Review*,

"Conversation with Poet Kate Daniels," 1995.

For Paul Mariani

Preface

Twenty years ago I assembled a collection of eight interviews, which was published by the University of Michigan Press under the title *Don't Ask*. I was forty-four years old when the earliest interview was conducted, fifty-one at the time of the last. In other words I was middle-aged and in mid-career, my poetry was beginning to receive widespread attention and gain notices, not all of them good, but I was optimistic about what lay ahead. I'm pleased to be able to say I've kept on writing, the work has continued to receive attention, not all of it good, and I look forward to more years as a writer.

Rereading the preface to *Don't Ask*, I found a younger, more energetic, sprightlier, and sassier me. I also found a man of greater political commitment and hope than the one writing these words, a man who still believed in the possibility of an America for all of us, one who at times felt compelled to make much of his radical loyalties and to advertise his belief in the anarchism of the early Christians, of William Blake, and especially of the Spaniards who in order to build a truly humane society struggled against the tyranny of church, army, and state until their movement was crushed by Franco's repressive forces. As often as possible—in both prose and verse—I referred to Buenaventura Durruti's visionary announcement that we carried a new world here in our hearts, a world that was growing minute by minute. I believed it, and then I did not. I think there was no crucial event. I let myself be ground down by the passage of time, by the steady flow of defeats, by the knowledge that the country had grown far more materialistic and cynical. Alas, my character was not up to my ideals.

The earliest interviews and conversations collected in the present volume were conducted after I turned sixty-four, and

they reflect a very different person, one who had entered a stage of life for which we aging Americans seem to have no word or phrase, though when my grandfather was this age I had no doubt he was “old,” ditto for my mother. I doubt I’m any wiser than when I completed the earlier collection, though I may appear so, for I am both less energetic and less angry. I believe my sense of humor is still intact though less zany. My hope is that my more “measured” stance is not an effort to sound wise. This is not a book of wisdom.

What sort of book is it then? It’s largely a series of efforts to respond to certain questions, some concerned with my personal experiences, some dealing with my life as a writer, others dealing with larger themes such as the relationship between poetry and politics or between decency and beauty. Many of these questions were first posed to me and others by other poets, journalists, poetry lovers, and students of poetry. My hope is that these interviews, conversations, and essays will be of some use to those who read poetry—especially the poetry of the recent past—for the energy, vision, and truths it often contains. There are also the personal tributes to people who have been especially valuable to me both as a man and a writer and to writers who had a special significance for me when I began taking poetry seriously.

A good deal has happened to American poetry since those earlier interviews; some of it I view positively, such as the ever-growing popularity of poetry in this country and the extraordinary variety of the poetry itself, but once again our poets seem divided into small, mutually exclusive camps, which to me is not a cause for celebration. Some of the worst aspects of today’s poetry scene have been with us since my first entrance into this arena and probably much longer: the prestige of murky, pretentious writing and the abhorrence of any poetry concerned with such practical matters as hunger, shelter, and survival, much less equality and exploitation. We still have “revolutionary” and “reactionary” movements that claim to be marginalized even while they dominate the university writing departments and many of the classiest magazines and presses. As Grace Paley once remarked, “Everything changes except the *avant-garde*.” Many of the concerns of this collection are much

the same as those of *Don't Ask*, but the voice and vision are a little less combative and hopeful.

Only a few of these interviews are printed here exactly as they were in their original journal incarnations. Upon rereading them I discovered I had a talent for steering the conversation to a few set subjects and then making statements I felt loyal to or comfortable with. Either that or—less likely—my interviewees were obsessed with the same questions. In any event, once I found myself reading the same scenarios over and over I tried to remove the redundancies so that the book itself could be more varied. None of these essays was written after 9/11, so you won't find any of the glossy and self-indulgent "Patriotism" that has sickened our culture or even a half-assed effort to combat it. (There is a lot of work waiting for the poets of America.) Nor will you find the self-censorship so many feared would be the result of our present wars, the domestic and the other one. American poetry will not be silenced; it will carry on the search for its own soul, that soul—as Whitman wrote—that possesses a "measureless pride which revolts from any lesson but its own."

Contents

I. Essays

On First Looking into John Keats's Letters	1
Beauty and/or Truth	13
Larry Levis	30
Craft Non-Lecture	36
Neruda y Yo	47
Two Journeys	53

II. Conversations and Interviews

With Harry Thomas's English Class	73
With Kate Daniels and Craig Watson	87
With Kate Bolick	99
With Paul Mariani	110
With Wen Stephenson	128
With Edward Hirsch	141

