

THE VOCATION OF DENISE LEVERTOV

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FOR HER, REVERENCE AND ATTENTION came first; then seeing and hearing. Only after that was there naming, and in the naming, the seeing intensified. This vocational summons to reverence, pay attention, see, hear, and name coalesced in her child's tentative self-understanding. At the age of ten, Denise Levertov claimed, she was 'an artist-person and had a destiny'.¹ At that point her artistic expression was still fluid; she wrote poetry, painted and danced. But language won out. Her passion for the things of the world and their naming became indistinguishable. Now, ten years after her death, what remains are more than twenty books of poems and essays. In life, her work and her passionate living were entwined; they remain so in death—inscribed on the page. Her 'pilgrimage' as a poet was also a pilgrimage of faith: the two were interconnected in her seventy-four years of living.

Levertov's description of her early sense of destiny might be dismissed as the recollection in later life of a successful poet if it were not for other evidence. At the age of twelve she sent a clutch of poems to T. S. Eliot for review; at seventeen, she published her first poem. Her early life contained elements that were to nurture a poetic sensibility. As a child she had solitude; her only sister was nine years her senior. She did not attend school; rather her mother gave her lessons until she was twelve. Unencumbered and much on her own, she was free to wander from her home in Ilford to the nearby English countryside of the county of Essex, exploring historic towns, revelling

¹ 'Autobiographical Sketch', in *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 260.

in opulent gardens, and visiting, time and again, the Victoria and Albert Museum in central London.

Like everyone in her family she read voraciously—Wordsworth, Tennyson, Keats, Herbert, Traherne and Rilke, as well as all the Victorian novelists. Every room of the house was filled with books, and everyone—mother, father and the two girls—wrote. There were no curtains on the windows: everyone could see in, and they could see out. Boundaries between inside and outside were permeable. Beatrice Spooner-Jones Levertoff and Paul Philip Levertoff (their daughter subsequently changed the spelling of her name) provided a rich intellectual and emotional environment for their children, a place where art and language, music, natural beauty and social sensibilities were valued. The Levertoffs were politically responsive. They took in refugees from Nazism and protested against Italian and Spanish fascism. Unknown to them, their girls hawked the *Daily Worker*.²

Sense of Destiny

Denise's sense of being different derived neither from ambition nor from competition, but from solitude and her ancestry as half Celt and half Jew. Hers was a difference of confidence. Her father was a Russian Jew and a descendant of the Rav of Northern White Russia, the founder of a branch of Hasidic Judaism; he converted to Christianity while studying in Germany. He met her Welsh mother in Constantinople. They married, and Paul Levertoff became an Anglican priest, assigned to Ilford, where there was a large Jewish community. He was a scholar of mysticism and a man of great religious intensity. Although Denise attended Anglican services, she did not define herself as religious. Rather, it was this sense of destiny which dominated her psyche. She was summoned to acknowledge and celebrate mystery, something she later claimed was 'the most consistent theme of my poetry from its beginnings'.³

If there was a place where her poet's vocation was born, it was in the Edenic world of her mother's garden. There, face to face with the natural world, the first act of reverence—paying attention—took

² The organ of the Communist Party of Great Britain. In 1966 it was renamed *Morning Star*.

³ 'The Poet's View', in *New and Selected Essays*, 246.

place. Later she would write of this beginning point and link it to the creation of the poet's song:

The progression seems clear to me: from Reverence for Life to Attention to Life, from Attention to Life to a highly developed Seeing and Hearing, from Seeing and Hearing (faculties almost indistinguishable for the poet) to the Discovery and Revelation of Form, from Form to Song.⁴

The natural world offered not only the origin of poetry but a touchstone for a life of celebration and joy. But her paradisiacal youth ended with the coming of war. 'The End of Childhood', the opening poem of *The Double Image*, her first collection of poems, describes this ending:

The world alive with love, where leaves tremble,
... marking miraculous hours
is burning round the children where they lie⁵

Nonetheless the wonder and openness of her childhood would never be entirely extinguished in her.

The war began when she was fifteen, ending any hope of her attending university. She took up war work and trained as a nurse. After the war she went to Paris and served in an English hospital. In Switzerland she met Mitchell Goodman,⁶ an American GI, whom she married in 1947, when she was 23. A year later she moved with him to New York City, and the following year their only child, Nikolai, was born.

Life in the USA

As a young poet, newly arrived in the United States of America, she was fortunate: six of her poems appeared in an anthology of new Romantic British poets. But, never having conceived of herself as English, she now tried to find a new voice. Inspired by Emerson and Thoreau, she read Ezra Pound, who taught her the precision and

⁴ 'Origins of the Poem', *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 55.

⁵ 'Childhood's End', *The Double Image* (London: Cresset, 1946), 9.

⁶ Mitch Goodman was a teacher and writer. He wrote three books of poetry and a novel, but was best known for his outspoken criticism of the Vietnam War in the 1960s.

accuracy of the poet's craft, and William Carlos Williams, from whom she learned the rhythm of the language of ordinary life. Through her husband's connections she met Robert Creeley and then Robert Duncan and Charles Olson, all of whom were associated with the Black Mountain School.⁷ While these relationships were personally and professionally fruitful, she never considered herself part of a school of poetry, although others tried to claim her.

During the 1950s the Goodmans lived in Mexico for a few years, and in France, before returning to New York City. It was a time of financial insecurity and domestic responsibility; none the less, she produced five collections of poems in which she carefully honed her craft. Those poems portray a double vision—wonder, joy and love on the one hand, and death, darkness and destruction on the other. In 'Three Meditations', she writes:

Barbarians
through the straight roads of
my empire, converging
on black Rome.
There is darkness in me.⁸

In 'Jacob's Ladder' she poignantly lays out a perilous way forward:

The stairway is not
a thing of gleaming strands
... It is of stone.
... A stairway of sharp
angles, solidly built.
... and a man climbing
must scrape his knees⁹

Yet within this brokenness and among the dualities of joy and destruction, she acknowledges a certain pull. In the poem 'The Thread' she writes:

Something is very gently,
invisibly, silently,

⁷ In the 1960s the Black Mountain School in North Carolina was a unique educational experiment for all forms of artistic expression, and especially for a group of avant-garde poets.

⁸ 'Three Meditations', *Jacob's Ladder* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 30.

⁹ *Jacob's Ladder*, 37.

pulling at me—a thread
 or net of threads
 ... I haven't tried
 the strength of it. No barbed hook
 pierced and tore me.¹⁰

In the 1960s she published several collections of poems, supporting herself as poetry editor of *The Nation* for several years and teaching part time at Vassar, City College of New York, Berkeley and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. One year she had a Guggenheim Fellowship, having been recommended by William Carlos Williams. She gave poetry readings and participated actively in protests first against nuclear weapons, and then against the involvement of the US in Vietnam. In the early 1970s she visited Hanoi and Moscow. Mitch Goodman was engaged in these protests too; in 1967 he was arrested and stood trial for anti-war activity.

Levertov believed that the poet must engage life, with all its promise and its brutality. While never confessional, her work is none the less intensely personal and self-revelatory. In 1960 she had written 'No barbed hook/ pierced and tore me', but in the next decade great sorrow closed in. Her anguish over the war and her grief at the haunted life and early death of her sister Olga expressed itself in her poetry. *The Sorrow Dance* (1967), *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970) and *Staying Alive* (1971) are filled with her



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¹⁰ *Jacob's Ladder*, 48.

rage, despair and grief. 'Revolution or death', a mantra from the streets, was brought into her poems. 'Mad Song' reflects her own suffering:

My madness is dear to me.
I who was almost always the sanest among my friends,
.... I've forgotten how to tell joy from bitterness.¹¹

The strain of the war weakened her commitment to pacifism and contributed to the fraying of relationships. Her friendship with Robert Duncan ended, never to be healed before his death. And her marriage became less emotionally satisfying. She and her husband separated in 1973 and divorced the following year.

At the centre of this great wrenching was her poetic vocation. Although she insisted that poetry should never be propaganda, she took as inspiration these lines from Ibsen: 'The task of the poet is to make clear to *himself*, and thereby to others, the temporal and eternal questions'.¹² For her, the eternal questions had parallels in the contemporary world and in the self. The individual was a microcosm reflecting the tyrannized injustices of the external world. Her question was how to respond, how to find authenticity in a world gone mad. Her poetry and her reflection on her craft proved to be the way through.

The Techniques of Poetry

There are few poets who have thought as deeply as Denise Levertov about the origins and the technique of poetry and the interrelatedness of the meditative and the active life. Two collections of essays, *The Poet in the World* (1974) and *New and Selected Essays* (1992), explore these questions and the relationship between poetry and engagement with a suffering world.

For Levertov the process of writing 'organic', 'living' poetry is linked to the content of the poem and to her vocation as a poet. Through intensity of experience and in 'passionate passivity' the poet waits until thought and feeling crystallize in words, and the music of poetry comes into being. The poet 'stand[s] with open mouth' and is

¹¹ 'Mad Song', *Relearning the Alphabet* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 49.

¹² She quotes Ibsen in the poem 'Three Meditations'.

'brought to speech'.¹³ The poem is the record of that inner song. The poet searches for the inner form of a thing, what Gerald Manley Hopkins called its 'inscape'. Intuition recognises this patterned order in which the thing partakes, and then expresses it in analogy, resemblance or allegory.¹⁴ Like her mentor Rilke, Levertov believed that if a thing was to speak to the poet it must be regarded as the only thing that existed and be given exclusive love at the centre of one's universe. This gave the poet a kind of 'inseeing', an access into the very centre of the thing itself.¹⁵ In *Poet in the World* she explores the vocation of the poet:

I believe poets are instruments on which the power of poetry plays. But they are also *makers*, craftsmen: it is given to the seer to see, but it is then his responsibility to communicate what he sees ...¹⁶

The poet—when he is writing—is a priest; the poem is a temple; epiphanies and communion take place within it. The communion is triple: between the maker and the needer within the poet; between the maker and the needers outside him—those who need but can't make their own poems ... and between the human and the divine in both poet and reader Writing the poem is the poet's means of summoning the divine¹⁷

Rilke's 'inseeing' and Hopkins' 'inscape' are closely linked to Levertov's understanding of imagination—the human capacity which connects poetry to compassion and which leads her to assert that the authentic poet must work against all forms of injustice and destruction. Poetry must be 'a giving of life'. In *Poet in the World* she explains this connection:

The imagination of what it is to *be* those other forms of life that want to live is the only way to recognition; and it is that imaginative recognition that brings compassion to birth. Man's capacity for evil, then, is less a positive capacity, for all its horrendous activity, than a failure to develop man's most human

¹³ Both phrases, 'stand[s] with open mouth' and 'brought to speech', are found in 'Some Notes on Organic Form' in *The Poet in the World*, 8.

¹⁴ 'Some Notes on Organic Form', *The Poet in the World*, 7.

¹⁵ 'Rilke as Mentor', *New and Selected Essays*, 235-236.

¹⁶ 'A Testament and a Postscript—1959-73', *The Poet in the World*, 3.

¹⁷ 'Origins of a Poem', 47.

function, the imagination, to its fullness, and consequently a failure to develop compassion.¹⁸

The role of the poet is to awaken and engage the reader. In her poem 'Taste and See' she reverses a famous line from Wordsworth:¹⁹

The world is
not with us—enough.
O taste and see.²⁰

This tasting and seeing meant not only revealing what was hidden, but holding oneself open to the experience of the transcendent, the numinous. The key was imagination, the chief of human faculties, the perceptive organ which synergized intellect, emotion and instinct, and made it possible to experience God.²¹ And it was to that numinous, transcendent mystery that Levertov turned increasingly.

A Re-evaluation of Her Faith

For most of her adult life Levertov considered herself an agnostic, suspecting that belief was irrelevant, an embarrassment, and potentially incompatible with her political and aesthetic values. After the war and the end of her marriage, she returned to her earlier pacifism and to a gradual re-evaluation of her faith. It was in 1979, while writing her long poem 'Mass for the Day of St Thomas Didymus', that she came to a new understanding of faith. For months she worked on the poem, and when she completed the *Agnus Dei* portion she realised that she had begun to resolve the questions she had wrestled with for years: how can the love of God and the suffering of humanity be reconciled? How can joy and sorrow co-exist? In writing the poem she came to understand the incarnation as the supreme relinquishment of God's self. By it, God, 'an innocence', was made 'defenceless', so that human freedom could be honoured. It was humanity which caused suffering, and it was humanity which needed to keep 'the spark of remote light' alive in a suffering world. Suffering

¹⁸ 'Origins of a Poem', 53.

¹⁹ 'The world is too much with us; late and soon/ Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers ... ', William Wordsworth, *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 270.

²⁰ 'O Taste and See', *Poems, 1960-1967* (New York: New Directions, 1983), 125.

²¹ 'A Poet's View', *New and Selected Essays*, 246.

did not annihilate joy; in the process of writing she came to an incipient reconciliation of the two.

Beginning in the early 1980s and continuing for more than a decade, Levertov taught at Stanford University during the winter term, even after she moved to Seattle in 1989. These were extraordinarily productive years during which she published six collections of new poems and two books of essays. She was now unattached; her son was grown and her mother had died in 1977. The focus of her work increasingly turned toward the magisterial natural wilderness of the Pacific North West and toward the numinous she found embedded and accessible everywhere. It was not that her religious faith had overcome doubt. 'In the blur of flesh/we bow, baffled',²² she wrote in 'Mass', and in 'Suspended' she acknowledged:

I had grasped God's garment in the void
but my hand slipped
on the rich silk of it.
... for though I claw at empty air and feel
nothing, no embrace,
I have not plummeted.²³

It was through the writing of her later poetry that what she called her 'shaky belief' became closer to faith: 'Thus for me the subject is really reversed: not "faith that works" but "work that enfaiths"'.²⁴ Her faith was never one of intellectual certainties, but rather of hope and intention deepened through her creative activity.

For almost ten years she explored the treasures of the various Christian traditions: Catholic, Anglican and Presbyterian. She was especially attracted to the mystical tradition of the Catholic Church and the nourishment she received in its liturgy. But her admiration for Catholic witnesses to justice—Dorothy Day, Daniel Berrigan, Raymond Hunthausen, Thomas Gumbleton, Helder Camera, Oscar Romero—as well as her friendship with the contemplatives Thomas Merton, Murray Bodo and David Steindl-Rast influenced her greatly. In about 1988 she became a Catholic, admitting that she did not like

²² 'Mass for the Day of St Thomas Didymus', *Denise Levertov—Poems, 1972-1982* (New York: New Directions, 2001), 266-273.

²³ 'Suspended', *Evening Train* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 119.

²⁴ 'Work that Enfaiths', *New and Selected Essays*, 255.



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the hierarchical structure of the Church, nor its inflexible dogma, but that, like others, she would now criticize from within.

In the final years of her life she found parallels between the work of the poet and the mystic. Both took risky journeys into the unknown, both were in service of the transcendent, both experienced transformation—the mystic in being, the poet in the work itself. In the art of writing poetry, the poet ‘summons the divine’; in the art of being, the mystic becomes the divine. Whether considering the presence of Brother Lawrence, the enacting of metaphor of the divine in Julian of Norwich, or the coming to speech of the mute poet-monk Caedmon, Levertov found these transformations of being analogous to the transformation of words into poetry. She also found resonance between the poet’s use of imagination and that of Ignatius of Loyola in the *Spiritual Exercises*.²⁵

²⁵ Nicholas O’Connell, ‘A Poet’s Valediction’, in *Poets & Writers* (May/June 1998), <http://www.pw.org/mag/levertov.htm>.

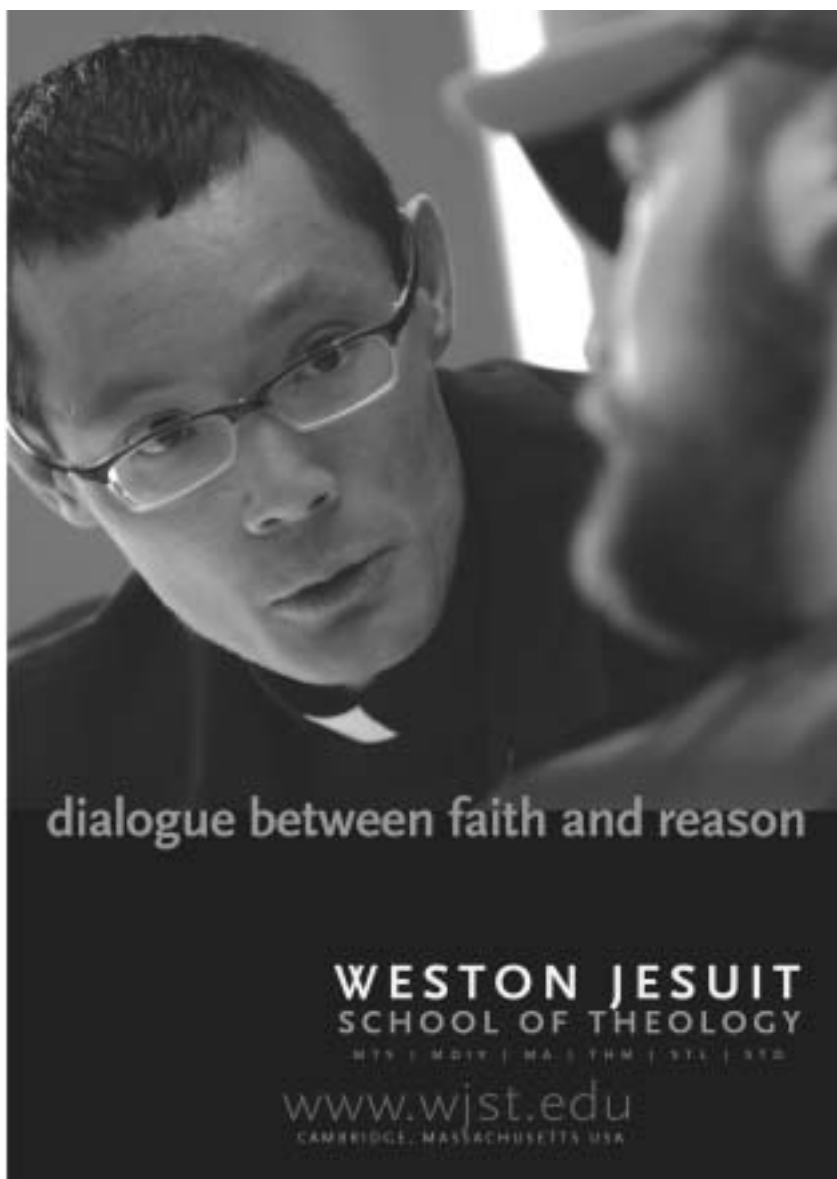
It took a lifetime of intense living for Denise Levertov to establish the link between poetic insight and compassion for the world. Having revered and seen, named and imaginatively entered into the other, the poet was incapable of destroying that which she had come to 'know'. Throughout her life, sometimes awkwardly and imperfectly, she enacted and lived out that insight by creating a significant corpus of poetry. Her coming to faith derived from her poet's appreciation of the sacramentality of the world and the power of imagination. While her faith might be 'flickering', it was nonetheless clear, simple and single in intention. It is summarised best in 'Primary Wonder', the final poem in her final book of poems. In it she confesses that day after day she forgets 'the quiet mystery', but it returns, once more present to her:

the mystery
that there is anything, anything at all
... rather than void; and that, O Lord,
Creator, Hallowed One, You still,
hour by hour sustain it.²⁶

Ten years after her death, the poetry of Denise Levertov continues to give witness to the primary wonder of life itself.

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²⁶ 'Primary Wonder', in *Sands of the Well* (New York: New Directions, 1996), 129. Denise Levertov died in Seattle, on 20 December 1997, of complications from lymphoma.



dialogue between faith and reason

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