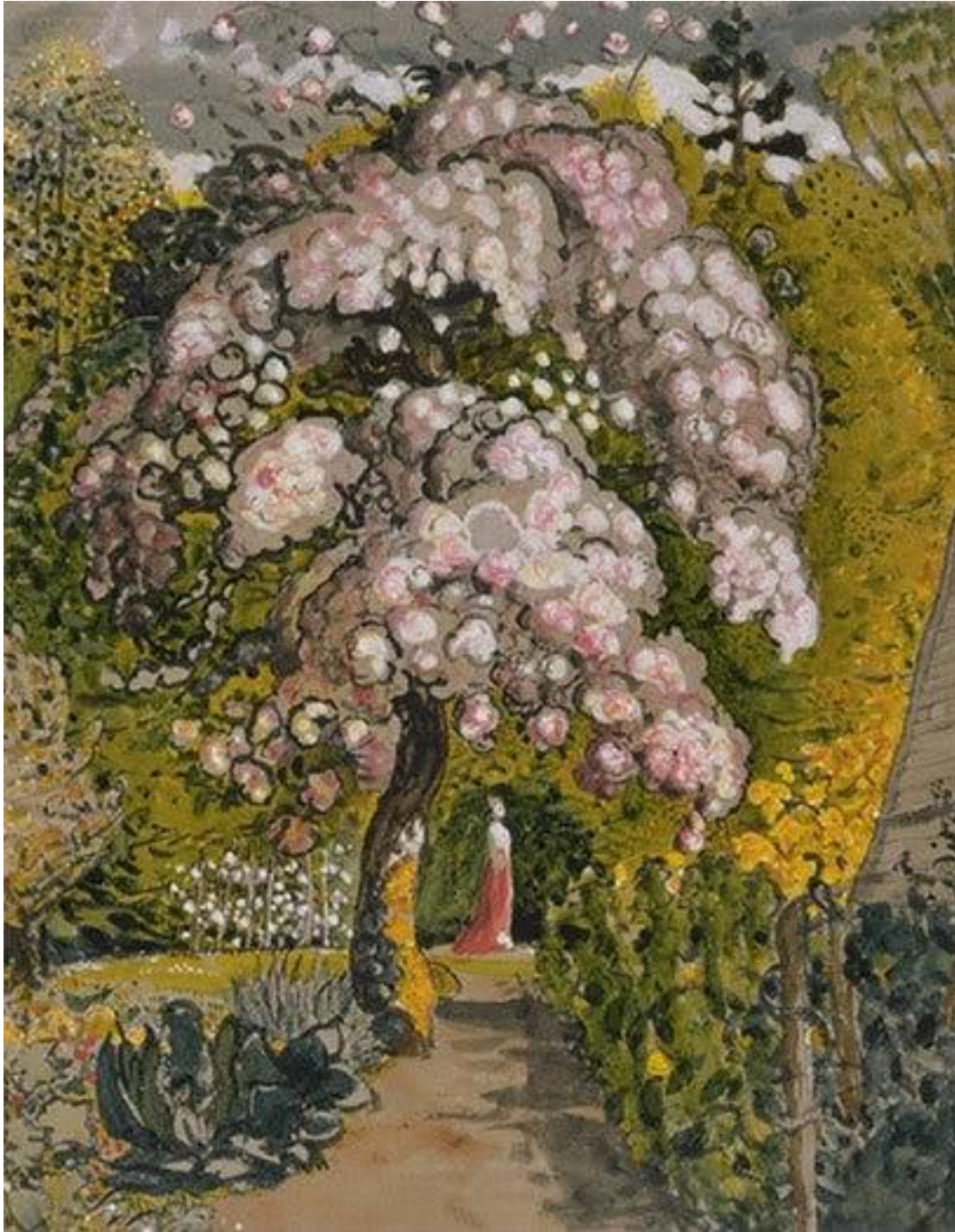


CRITICISM

Review: On "The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov"

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The arrival of an author's *Collected Poems* sometimes amounts to little more than an academic curiosity. Scholars and critics sift through the treasure for hidden secrets or clues: here, an allusion to the messy divorce; there, corroborating evidence of depression; and over here, some juvenilia with homoerotic symbolism. Usually, only lifelong fans and librarians bother to purchase such books, which end up as collector's items shelved alongside prize-winning gems. And maybe this is how it should be. With so much new poetry published each year, why should anyone bother with the tossed-off efforts of a long-dead poet?

The *Collected Poems of Denise Levertov* is a different case altogether. A major poet whose writing covered the better part of the twentieth century, Levertov is probably best known as an activist of the 1970s who strongly opposed the Vietnam War and fought for social justice. Others, especially Catholics, see her primarily as a religious poet—one who returned the spirit of Romanticism to its source in divine mystery. With a definitive biography already out, there isn't much more to say about her correspondence with Robert Duncan (a friend and critic of her political poems) or Adrienne Rich (a bolder feminist). Nor is there much else to say about her time as a nurse during World War II, her troubled marriage to an American activist, her journeys to Mexico and Vietnam, or her spats with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. The book is worth reading for a different reason. It is worth reading because, when experienced in whole, Levertov's work is a tireless, exasperating, heroic quest through the human imagination, from its core to its outer orbit. She held nothing back. And because she possessed an unerring sense of literary vocation, the book reads like an earnest soliloquy that lasts for fifty years. From the romanticism of her youth to the activism of her middle years to the serene Catholic vision of her last two

collections, she spent her life tracing “the path / between reality and the soul.” Exhausting her imagination, she tested the limits of art.

Born and raised in Ilford, England, Denise Levertov came to the United States at the age of twenty-five. Her mother was Welsh, a fan of Tennyson; her father a Russian Jew who eventually became an Anglican minister. From the beginning, her poems are driven by a restless spiritual vision:

Too easy: to write of miracles, dreams where the famous give
mysterious utterance to silent truth;
to confuse snow with the stars,
simulate a star’s fantastic wisdom.

In England, she wrote under the shadow of T.S. Eliot (who sent her a note of encouragement). In America, she became a blend of idioms, her Anglican tones now harmonizing with the voice of William Carlos Williams:

His theme
over and over:

the twang of plucked
catgut
from which struggles

music,

the tufted swampgrass
quicksilvering
dank meadows.

Though her spiritual vision never wavered, it did take on a new quality. Inspired by Williams and Robert Creeley, she began to deliberately mimic the way that speech affects “thought-rhythms.” In an essay from 1965, “An Approach to Public Poetry Listeners,” Levertov explains that her poetry aspired to “the accurate notation of thought and feeling-patterns,” which would result in “both human testimony and aesthetic experience.” Convinced that poetry was a battle for conscience that had to be waged in consciousness, she began to chart her own “inscape,” a term she borrowed from Gerard Manley Hopkins (whose creative ecstasy could not abide the standard use of English). Like Hopkins’, her “inscape” was theological, as in her “Hymn to Eros”:

Drowsy god,
slow the wheels of my thought
so that I listen only
to the snowfall hush of
thy circling.

One of the revelations of this collection is that Levertov’s later “religious” poetry is of a piece with her earlier work. She didn’t

retreat into the church in order to leave the past behind—her poetics, politics, and spirituality were always intertwined. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur once referred to his Christian identity as “a chance transformed into destiny by a continuous choice,” a description which might have suited Levertov. In “Growth of a Poet,” published in *The Freeing of the Dust*, she borrows these lines from Pasternak:

To serve the people
one must write for the ideal reader. Only for the ideal reader.
And who or what is that ideal reader? God. One must imagine,
one must deeply imagine

that great Attention.

Attention—what the philosopher Nicolas Malebranche called “the natural prayer of the soul”—is a word that Levertov turns to often. For her, the value of poetry is that it asks us to pay closer attention to ourselves as living creatures. It combats paralysis, numbness, dispassion:

There, where you live,
live:
start over,
everyman, with
the algae of your dreams.

Her own dreams, incidentally, were filled with Blake and Rilke. But for Levertov, in contrast to the pure Romantics, artistic inspiration was only a beginning—the point is what you do with it. She was suspicious of those whose “poetic temperament” absolved them from ethical quandaries. And while she shared the Romantic vision of a universal language—and also, to an extent, their odd pantheism—she didn’t have time for melancholy, that “fine art of unhappiness.” She agreed with D.H. Lawrence, who wrote: “Virtue lies in the heroic response to creative wonder.”

She thought of herself as “an explorer through language,” primarily for herself and then for her readers. Her goal was to transcend the paltry ego (what William Blake called the “spectral self”) in order to achieve a broader communion. In contrast to many contemporaries, she never credited Freud’s analysis of the unconscious as a site of neurosis; she preferred Jung’s characterization of the shared global psyche, which implies that one’s psychology is just a fragment of life’s puzzle.” When thinking about her own life—one of constant displacement—Levertov liked the word “tesserae”: the parts of a mosaic. She even put it in the title of a book, *Tesserae: Memories and Suppositions*, which serves as a kind of memoir. And she used it in lines of self-exploration, such as these, from “Decipherings”:

Felt life
grows in one’s mind:
each semblance
forms and
reforms cloudy
links with
the next

and the next:
chimes and
gamelon gongs

resound:

pondering,
picking the tesserae,
blue or
perhaps vermilion,

what one aches for
is the mosaic music
makes in one's ears

transformed.

In the late 1960s Levertov entered what might be called her radical phase. Three books in particular—*Relearning the Alphabet* (1970), *To Stay Alive* (1971), and *The Freeing of the Dust* (1975)—chronicle the ways she urged her poetry towards what she called “total involvement”:

Joy
is real, torture
is real, we strain to hold
a bridge between them open,
and fail,
or all but fail.

Attention alone was no longer enough: the age required a righteous anger that art could hardly contain. She imagined stabbing Henry Kissinger, throwing napalm in Nixon's face. She channeled Neruda's call for people to "come and see the blood in the streets." The new style was not universally popular. Marjorie Perloff wrote: "It is distressing to report that [*To Stay Alive*] contains a quantity of bad confessional verse." Others dismissed her as preachy. Hayden Carruth was more perceptive, and saw that by including bits of correspondence alongside highly lyrical passages, she was echoing William Carlos Williams's style in *Paterson*.

Her most widely anthologized poem is also her most uncharacteristic. In "What Were They Like?," a polemic about the moral vacuum at the heart of the war in Vietnam, Levertov experiments with a new technique for justifying compassion:

- 1) Did the people of Viet Nam
 use lanterns of stone?
- 2) Did they hold ceremonies
 to reverence the opening of buds?
- 3) Were they inclined to quiet laughter?
- 4) Did they use bone and ivory,
 jade and silver, for ornament?
- 5) Had they an epic poem?

Her political poems—on the riots in Detroit, the Nigerian civil war, American involvement in El Salvador, and the threat of nuclear weapons—are a mix of rage, vulnerability, and near-despair. An

active part of the anti-war scene in Berkeley, California, Levertov was jailed on several occasions for civil disobedience. These confrontations awakened her to the dangers of “innocence,” by which she meant an unwillingness to bear reality. “Goodbye to Tolerance” is addressed to “Genial poets,” whom she advises to leave behind “the cherished worms of your dispassion, / your pallid ironies”:

Goodbye, goodbye,
I don't care
If I never taste your fine food again,
Neutral fellows, seers of every side.
Tolerance, what crimes
Are committed in your name.

Robert Duncan was probably right when he said that the purpose of poetry is not to point fingers or rally crowds but to “reveal what is back of the political slogans.” Yet Levertov’s political vision isn’t something to dismiss; it is a high-stakes battle between conscience and the imagination. She does, after all, speak for a rage that is universally felt—what in “Staying Alive” she calls

the clamor

of unquenched desire’s
radiant decibels shattering

the patient wineglass
set out by private history's ignorant

quiet hands...

This becomes a recurring theme: the tension between our private lives and the world we cannot ignore. She refers to daily life as “a substance that expands and contracts, a rhythm / different from the rhythm of history.” She calls the news “those foul / dollops of History / each day thrusts at us, pushing them / into our gullets.” Beneath this, however, is a martyr's impulse: “the desire to enact / metaphor, for flesh to make known to intellect... / ...God's agony.” The poems from this period move in every direction at once. Just as we are invited to reflect on the “dragonfly blue” of Rilke's eyes, we are flown back to El Salvador, where a chorus sings the names of the dead. Just as we are settling in to a new ecological consciousness, we are asked to consider again the violence of war:

If from Space not only sapphire continents,
swirling oceans, were visible, but the wars—
like bonfires, wildfires, forest conflagrations,
flame and smoky smoulder—the Earth would seem
a bitter pomander ball bristling with poison cloves.

Even in her darkest poems, a disciplined wonder is still at work.
Keats had Negative Capability; Levertov had “double vision”: an

ability to see, all at once, the mystery of the universe and the wretched of the earth.

Few poets believed so definitively in the power of words to shape our lives. Levertov mocked the propaganda of State Department spokesmen, but she also had little time for those who sought to undermine bedrock meanings. For her, a word like *mercy* is invested with living force. (Also, not many poets would describe the past with a word like “palimpsestuous.”) She returned often to the possibility of a secret Ur-language, “hiding out like a pygmy pterodactyl / in the woods.” The challenge, as she understood it, was “to give / to the Vast Loneliness / a hearth...” It was a task that required a great deal of self-encouragement over the years. Here she is addressing herself in “Writing in the Dark”:

Keep writing in the dark:
a record of the night, or
words that pulled you from depths of unknowing,
words that flew through your mind, strange birds
crying their urgency with human voices,
or opened
as flowers of a tree that blooms
only once in a lifetime:

words that may have the power
to make the sun rise again.

Her last two collections, *Sands of the Well* (1998) and *This Great Unknowing* (1999), are more forthrightly spiritual. The God she seeks mostly resembles the God of Christian mystics, with Julian of Norwich the chief exemplar. In these final poems, the epic of her

interior life comes to rest on the natural world. Most striking is how quickly they leap outside the self, how spontaneously they transcend the old conflicts, and how easily she comes to perceive, in her words, “the more that there is.” Here is “A Gift” in its entirety:

Just when you seem to yourself
nothing but a flimsy web
of questions, you are given
the questions of others to hold
in the emptiness of your hands,
songbird eggs that can still hatch
if you keep them warm,
butterflies opening and closing themselves
in your cupped palms, trusting you not to injure
their scintillant fur, their dust.
You are given the questions of others
as if they were answers
to all you ask. Yes, perhaps
this gift is your answer.

In “On Belief in the Physical Resurrection of Jesus,” she writes that miracles are “the ultimate need, bread / of life.” Another poem includes a vision of Jesus walking on water. These moments alienate some readers as the political poems alienate others. But there isn’t a miracle to be found; there is only the miraculous. She considers the quiet minds of trees; she calls daylight a “young virtuoso.” Here is her final poem, “Aware”:

When I found the door
I found the vine leaves

speaking among themselves in abundant
whispers.
My presence made them
hush their green breath,
embarrassed, the way
humans stand up, buttoning their jackets,
acting as if they were leaving anyway, as if
the conversation had ended
just before you arrived.
I liked
the glimpse I had, though,
of their obscure
gestures. I liked the sound
of such private voices. Next time
I'll move like cautious sunlight, open
the door by fractions, eavesdrop
peacefully.

Czeslaw Milosz once defined poetry as “the passionate pursuit of the Real,” a phrase that captures Levertov’s work in all its apparent contradiction. Others would call it pursuit of God, or Love, or Justice, or Nature. To her it was all the same music.