

ED BLOCK

Poet, Word, and World:  
Reality and Transcendence  
in the Work of  
Denise Levertov

*Language is the only Homeland.*

CZESLAW MILOSZ

*Every work of art is an act of faith.*

DENISE LEVERTOV

IF WE COULD ASK HER, Denise Levertov would probably scoff at the idea that her poetry raises—let alone answers—any questions about reality and transcendence. Not that she minimized the importance of poetry. As she herself said, “poetry is necessary to a whole man,” and elsewhere: poetry is a means to “a saner state in the midst of our being.”<sup>1</sup> Her claims for her own poetry notwithstanding, however, Levertov’s poetry—like all great poetry—*does* raise such questions, and it does so precisely because of the relation Levertov assumes among the poet, language, and the world. The result of that complex union *is* poetry, a congeries that constitutes a certain kind of reality and intimates transcendence. By considering and reflecting on some of her prose and poetry under the headings of poet, language, and world, I would like to provide some grounds for an ongoing reassess-

ment that will sustain a sense of Levertov's importance, forestalling the kind of decline or eclipse in reputation that is sometimes the sad fate of writers who, in W. H. Auden's words, have "become [their] admirers."

In a 1997 interview Levertov discussed her vocation and how poetry can be a kind of reality.<sup>2</sup> Her comments recall a number of insights that critics of her work have made over the years and many of the things we can infer from her work. From her mother she derived her attention to things,<sup>3</sup> and from her father something of the Hasidic spirit that sees "the divine spark" in everything. From her reading of R. M. Rilke she got the sense of vocation; from G. M. Hopkins the idea of inscape and instress; from William Carlos Williams the often quoted, much interpreted aphorism, "No ideas except in things"; and from a variety of artists, writers, and critics the notion expressed so well in the phrase from Wordsworth that she quoted so often: "[L]anguage is not the dress but the incarnation of thoughts."<sup>4</sup> It is just this fundamentally reverent, receptive, and attentive disposition that makes her encounter with reality and the mystery at the heart of Being so productive of a sense of transcendence.

It is particularly important to discuss Levertov's contribution to the exploration of reality and transcendence at this time. And though Levertov had little interest in or patience for modern theory, a first approach to the subject requires that I make some observations about the (postmodern) problem. We live in a technological environment that promises to improve the human condition. But this environment can also quickly become hostile, lethal, toxic. We live amid the hopes and nightmares of genetic engineering, the fascination with computers, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality. We are haunted by the fantasies of speculative fiction and coerced and co-opted by the increasingly hectic pace of commercial and indeed all productive life.<sup>5</sup> And we are further urged on by the pace of automation, superfast computers, and the miniaturization of all things.

Behind these phenomena stand the various ways in which human beings are shaped by mediated forms of experience, or experience modified, transformed, and altered by dominating mind-sets or mind-sets of domination. We cannot, as Wallace Stegner observes, look at anything without wanting to use it, own it, reshape it to our needs, desires, or fantasies.<sup>6</sup> We cannot think of anything but must evolve a theory to explain it, or even a whole system of explanations that, in the end, tend to dominate and overpower the “anything,” justifying whatever use we want to make of it. These are some of the bitter dregs of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment.

Levertov’s poetry is important to discuss precisely because it dramatizes the realization that much of what I have just referred to is the result of human beings’ greatest gifts and capacities: the ability to make sense, to put to use, but also thereby often to overpower and to dominate. In “Tragic Error,” a poem from her collection *Evening Train*, she reinterprets a key passage of Genesis that has to do with human beings’ attitude toward creation. Perhaps most prominent and obvious in this poem is the speaker’s identification with those who have “looted and pillaged.”<sup>7</sup> Also characteristic of Levertov’s poetry—particularly the later works—is the “rereading” in which she engages. Instead of familiar Biblical words like “subdue” and “dominion,” she proposes a whole new perspective: “Surely we were to have been/ earth’s mind, mirror, reflective source.” We were “to love the earth,/ to dress and keep it.” Employing metaphors familiar from throughout her work, she imagines our role “to be those cells of earth’s body that could perceive and imagine.” It is to “bring the planet/ into the haven it is to be known” that Levertov sees as part of the poet’s unique task.

“Tragic Error” derives from the period after Levertov’s joining the Roman Catholic communion, but even at her most “agnostic,” it was never hard to see her reverence for life and all that is mysterious. As long ago as 1967, Albert Gelpi noted that “she shares with [Robert] Duncan a religious sense of experience,”<sup>8</sup> which he later

called “a sacramental notion of life” (92). Not much later, Rudolph L. Nelson, invoking Paul Tillich, observed that “Denise Levertov probes beneath the threshold of the here and now and finds the transcendent within the stuff of immediate experience” (109). To show that these early speculations were accurate but also insufficiently precise or comprehensive, I would like to explore under the three headings of *poet*, *word*, and *world* the ways in which Levertov’s thought and poetry provide a significant postmodern perspective on reality and transcendence.

I begin with a quote from the late Swiss humanist and theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar.

When one experiences startling beauty (in nature or in art) then phenomena normally veiled are perceived in their uniqueness. What confronts us is overpowering, like a miracle, and only as a miracle can it be understood. The appearance of its inner unfathomable necessity is both binding and freeing, for it is seen clearly to be the appearance of freedom itself. . . . Such a union of the undiscoverable and the highest plausibility is only to be found in the realm of disinterested beauty.<sup>9</sup>

Balthasar, who—incidentally—acknowledged some of the same formative figures as Levertov (Goethe, Rilke, and Heidegger, to name just three), refers here to the response one makes to beauty. But the quote also accurately reflects what Gelpi and others have seen in Levertov’s own response to those “startling” instances of beauty that then become the subject of her poetry and our access to a sense of transcendence. With the help of Balthasar’s quote, I would like to examine Levertov’s idea of the poet.

### *I. The Poet*

Levertov saw herself as an artistic person and from early on felt that she “had a sense of being in some way special.”<sup>10</sup> Poetry was a voca-

tion that she espoused, like Keats,<sup>11</sup> and that she spoke of in the essay “Rilke as a Mentor.”<sup>12</sup> Even as an agnostic, when she adopted Rilke’s views, Levertov speaks of the poet as one who “gave himself most wholly to the service of his art” (134). Echoing Balthasar’s emphasis on “the realm of disinterested beauty,” she says: “The poet was also to be a disinterested center of intelligence.” In another essay, “Great Possessions,” she complains about works of “documentary realism” and their “lack of a unifying intelligence, of the implicit presence of an interpreting spirit behind such notations” (121). And, sounding a bit like Gerard Manley Hopkins (whom she also admired), she praises William Carlos Williams as one exemplar of “that power of imagination which first conceived and grasped *newness* in a new world” (121). The poet, she says, “does not *use* poetry, but is at the service of poetry” (137). She takes William Carlos Williams’ injunction, “No ideas but in things” as “a moral statement” (137), related to E. M. Forster’s famous “Only Connect.” In another essay, “Origins of a Poem,” she quotes from one of Rilke’s letters, referring to the works that artists produce as “exemplary for *every* human activity by reason of their innate disinterestedness, freedom, and intensity” (47–48).

Levertov quotes Rilke approvingly when he describes “the unique phenomenon that your diligent and exclusive love has placed at the center of the universe” and notes: “that intensity of attention is rarely exercised—an attention which would lead the writer into a deeper, more vibrant language and so translate the reader into the heavens and hells that lie about us in all seemingly ordinary objects and experiences” (126). In another interview Levertov notes that attention to concrete sensory detail “releases so many understandings and releases language that you hadn’t planned for, but which is demanded by the need to precisely articulate what you are experiencing or have experienced.”<sup>13</sup>

We get another perspective on Levertov’s conception of the poet by considering her past. She has written on a number of occa-

sions about the facts and significance of her past,<sup>14</sup> and she has published at least one (quasi-poetic) insight into how that past was important to her art. The latter piece, titled “The Poet in the World,” was written for a symposium on the question, “Is There a Purely Literary Study?” But its form and style often resemble a prose-poem. The piece begins with the poet’s birth and early life, a narrative that takes the form of a phenomenological, almost Wordsworthian *bildungsroman*: “It is two years later. The poet is in a vast open space covered by rectangular cobblestones. In some of the crevices between them there is bright green moss. If he pokes it with a finger it feels cold, it gives under pressure but is slightly prickly” (130). The poet is then in a cathedral square, and the remainder of the paragraph describes a number of things associated with that square and things that happen there: cathedral towers, pigeons, the darkness inside, a child outside, and a group of adults. In the midst of a long sentence that describes the “climax” of the scene (the poet’s accidentally breaking the child’s toy), narrative time jumps forward:

[I]t is ten years later and the twin towers of it [the cathedral] share the gray of the cobblestones in the back of a large space in his mind where flying buttresses and flying pigeons mean cathedral and the silence he knows is inside the great door’s darkness is the same silence he maintained down among the feet and legs of adults who beat their wings up above him in the dark air and vanished into the sky. (130-131)

It seems obvious that the passage is trying to convey the sense of childhood’s noninterpretive and associative linking of things and events. Both “flying” and “silence” become metaphoric links relating physical experiences and more complex events—such as adults vanishing, like birds “into the sky,” suggesting their deaths.

The next paragraph continues the associative and metaphoric linking, in a single sentence of 138 words:

It is Time that pushed them [the adults] into the sky, and he has been living ten, twenty, thirty years; he has read and forgotten thousands of books, and thousands of books have entered him with their scenes and people, their sounds, ideas, logics, irrationalities, are singing and dancing and walking and crawling and shouting and keeping still in his mind, not only in his mind but in his way of moving his body and in his actions and decisions and in his dreams by night and by day and in the way he puts one word before another to pass from the gate of an avenue and into the cathedral that looms at the far end of it holding silence and darkness in its inner space as a finger's breadth of moss is held between two stones. (131)

Once again, this passage—along with the previous—seeks to convey the sense of how the poet assimilates and then appropriates experiences. It is fair to infer that for the poet all are equally “real” experiences, whether they occur “outside,” as in the cathedral square, or in the “inner space” where reading books, for instance, occurs. It is also fair to infer that when the passage says the books are “not only in his mind but in his way of moving his body and in his actions and decisions,” the passage suggests the way in which “vicarious” experience, the experience of books, is transformed into physical actions—and the very identity of the poet.

This passage, and a short paragraph reinforcing its message, introduce a long quote from Rilke's autobiographical novel, *Malte Laurids Brigge*, referring to memories:

One must be able to forget them when they are many and one must have the immense patience to wait till they are come again. For the memories themselves are still nothing. Not till they have turned to blood within us, to glance and gesture, nameless and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves—not till then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a poem arises in their midst and goes forth from them. (132)

This passage expresses Levertov's own mode of composition and something of the "philosophical" and psychological foundation upon which that mode of composition and her awareness of spirit and the transcendent are based. Of paramount importance is the fact that the poet's experiences—real and vicarious, direct and learned through symbolic forms—combine to become a part of who the poet is, and that word, decision, gesture, and action derive from these experiences.

Another essay, "Interweavings: Reflections on the Role of Dream in the Making of Poems," explains what Levertov learned about dreams and how they shape her conception of the poet and make her open to the movement of spirit and the transcendent. She even discusses the role of "word play" in dreams, and how such phenomena enrich the writing of poems. Discussing how her then-husband Mitchell Goodman began seeing a Jungian therapist who suggested that he and Levertov discuss his dreams, Levertov notes: "[O]ur common intense interest in our own and each other's nightly adventures in the inner world acted as a powerful bond. After a while I too began to see a therapist and to work more methodically in trying to comprehend the symbolic language."<sup>15</sup> Of the three things she says she derives from dreams, the "consideration of dream images, in which the imagination has free play, or at least a play less censored, than it has in the waking mind"(38) is the most important.

Yet another piece, "Work and Inspiration: Inviting the Muse," provides another important insight since it speaks about the creation of three specific poems from her collection, *The Sorrow Dance* ("The Son" I and II and "A Man"). A preliminary caution—Levertov reminds the reader that her description of how she wrote the poems is recollective: "I wish to point out that the process I have described does not take place in a condition of alert self-observation. When I looked through my worksheets I *remembered* what I had been doing . . . but the state of writing, although intense, is dreamy and sensuous, not ratiocinative."<sup>16</sup>

“Work and Inspiration” is insightful, first, because in it Levertov, like a true Romantic poet, acknowledges the “inspired” nature, the “givenness,” of what she believes are “often the best poems . . . the poems I myself and which readers, without knowledge of their history, have singled out for praise” (25). But she also says:

[I]n considering what happens in writing poems which have a known history, I have come to feel convinced that they are not of a radically different order; it is simply that in the “given” poem *the same kind of work* has gone on below, or I would prefer to say beyond, the threshold of consciousness. The labor we call conscious is, if the poem is a good one, or rather if the poet knows how to work, not a matter of a use of the intellect divorced from other factors but of the intuitive interplay of various mental and physical factors, just as in unconscious precreative activity. (25–26)

What the remainder of the essay provides, however, are a number of additional insights into the unconscious nature of her composition. In describing the composition of the three poems, she shows how personal preoccupations and themes, childhood recollections, and reading all contribute to the process of creation.

Describing the attempt to convey a sense of her son, Nikolai, she refers to the need for “that passionate patience which Keats named Negative Capability and which I believe to be a vital condition for the emergence of a true poem” (29). In discussing later drafts she notes how the metaphoric theme of a river or “current” of life became part of the poem, and how she rejects a line quoted from an Edmund Waller couplet. By the eighth draft another—putatively archetypal—image, that of flame, has become more central. Having discussed the first “son” poem, she explains how a note to that poem became the impetus for “A Man.” In time, she says, she “was given a vision.” Her comment on the source and function of such visions is informative:

With visions, as with dreams, comes some knowledge of what it is one is seeing. If one is a poet, then the envisioning, the listening, and the writing of the word, are, for that while, fused. For me (and I hope for the reader) this poem *bodies forth* the known material that led to it. Its images could not have been willfully created as mere illustrations of a point. But in mulling over what I knew I felt and thought, I had stirred up levels of imagination, of things I did not know I knew, which made it possible for the poem to emerge in metaphor and find its songlike structure. (38)

What emerges about Levertov's reliance on the unconscious, and inspiration, is that it is a complex, reciprocal activity. Personal experience, sometimes expressed in archetypal images and her own past reading, all enter in.<sup>17</sup> Taken together with what we learn from "The Poet in the World" about the poet's often almost unconscious assimilation and transformation of life experience, these essays on the unconscious provide a first, tentative outline of how these factors within the poet combine to form the matrix out of which a sense of transcendent reality emerges.

Without ignoring the many poems that Levertov says owed some of their origin to dreams, a poem from *Candles in Babylon* gives some sense of the process and its outcome. Its title is "Writing in the Dark."<sup>18</sup> An accurate description of a common phenomenon—writing notes to oneself on a bedside pad—the poem rests on a tension between the factual way in which the speaker records dreams, and "the vision" that those dreams suggest. The emphasis on words, "words that pulled you from depths of unknowing, / words that flew through your mind, strange birds / crying their urgency with human voices," implies the importance of language, especially in the final two lines, which suggest that "words [that] may have the power / to make the sun rise again."

By way of introducing Levertov's ideas on language—to which some of the above has already referred—I would consider one last

quote on the poet's task. Referring to the expression, "the poet's task," Levertov says:

[W]e undercut ourselves, deprive ourselves of certain profound and necessary understandings, if we dismiss the question [of the poet's task] as irrelevant, and refuse, out of what is really only a kind of embarrassment, to consider as a task, and a lofty one, the engagement with language into which we are led by whatever talent we may have.<sup>19</sup>

Though relatively modest about her own poems' claims, from early on Levertov made great claims for poetry as a genre and its unique use of language. Her statements imply an awareness and acceptance of spirit, and a transcendent reality beyond that of the world. She also stresses poetry's effect. It is revolutionary.<sup>20</sup> The poet writes poetry for the same reason people read it: "to get illumination, revelations that help them survive, to survive in spirit not only in body" (150). It is the "poet's task more than ever . . . to try to preserve language."<sup>21</sup> Complicating this vision is Levertov's implicit realization that perhaps our greatest gift, language itself, is both the agent of our own transformation and subject to deformation by its "interaction" with the world we have modified.

## II. Language

Levertov's poetic practice—and no small part of her reflection on that practice—enacts a way back, not to unmediated experience, but to a reciprocal, dialogic, interactive merging of experience with language, allowing a sense of transcendent reality to emerge. In "The Origins of a Poem," an essay from 1968, Levertov observes that "it is the poet who has language in his care; the poet who more than others recognizes language also as a *form of life* and a common resource to be cherished and served as we should serve and cherish earth and its waters, animal and vegetable life, and each other."<sup>22</sup>

These words recall Rilke's admonition that the poet "take personal and creative responsibility for his words,"<sup>23</sup> and they echo those we found in "Tragic Error."

Levertov's reflections on the importance of language are amplified in the following long passage:

The act of realizing inner experience in material substance is in itself an action *toward others*, even when the conscious intention has not gone beyond the desire for self-expression. Just as the activity of the artist gives body and future to "the mysterious being hidden behind his eyes," so the very fact of concrete manifestation, of paint, of words, reaches over beyond the world of inner dialogue. When Héliion says that then art becomes a realization, he clearly means not "awareness" but quite literally "real-ization," making real, substantiation. Instead of description, expression, comment—all of which only refer to an absent subject—art becomes substance, entity.<sup>24</sup>

Invoking the force of George Steiner's argument in *Real Presences*, I would say that art becomes a new reality, underwritten by belief in the transcendent. This passage leads from Rilke ("realizing inner experience") through a passage from Jean Héliion to a passage from an essay by Martin Heidegger.<sup>25</sup>

Levertov's use of the Heidegger quote needs a bit of background. Richard Jackson<sup>26</sup> also discusses Levertov and Heidegger, but his angle is somewhat different, especially in that he links Heidegger to Jean-Paul Sartre, while I show Heidegger's affinities with one of his students, Hans-Georg Gadamer. Levertov used the quote as recently as the 1997 *Image* interview. It is a quote—as she says—found in her notebook. She had pondered it before the earlier essay. But how much of the whole essay is "distilled" in that single passage? From the essay "The Poet in the World" it is safe to assume that to some extent the whole essay has "turned to blood" within her. In

what follows I hope to suggest the extent and the effect of that assimilation and appropriation.

I do not propose to say that Levertov was greatly influenced by Heidegger. Instead, I would propose to show that she was impressed enough with the quote to copy it in her notebook and to use it on at least two occasions. I would also propose that her view of language is as subtle as his. We can, therefore, make some use of what his essay suggests about language. Levertov catches the essential spirit of Heidegger's essay, but it would also be dangerous to read all of his insights into her work. What Levertov, as poet, does with Heidegger's use of language—in her poetry—is what makes her insights *there* surpass Heidegger, especially where it comes to her intimating a sense of transcendent reality in everyday persons, objects, and events.

Realizing inner experience is important, perhaps *sine qua non*. The poet, the “center of intelligence,” attentively opens herself to some aspect of the world. As “Poet in the World” implies, that aspect is “taken into” the poet and made an inner experience. But “the act of realizing inner experience in material substance is itself an action *toward others* even when the conscious intention has not gone beyond the desire for self-expression” (49). Realizing inner experience becomes an action because the “material substance” in which the poet tries to realize inner experience is language. It is because—to quote Levertov's paraphrase of Heidegger on Hölderlin—“to be human is to *be a conversation*” that any use of language is “an action *toward others*.” Poetry is the preeminent form of language as “action *toward others*.”

Later in the section of his essay that reflects on Hölderlin's “conversation” phrase, Heidegger tries to describe the unity implied by such conversation. For such unity, something must persist; “the essential word must be constantly related to the one and the same. . . . But the one and the same can only be manifest in the light of something perpetual and permanent. Yet permanence and perpetu-

ity only appear when what persists and is present begins to shine.”<sup>27</sup> This is what poetry of the kind Levertov is talking about achieves. Levertov puts it best when she says, again, in an almost Heideggerian phrase: “[I]nstead of description, expression, comment—all of which only refer to an absent subject—art becomes substance, entity,” or, as she says elsewhere, it becomes “incarnation” and openness to the transcendent.

Later in his essay Heidegger explains that it is only after language relates to something permanent that “he [a human being] can expose himself to the changeable, to that which comes and goes. . . . Only after ‘ravenous time’ has been riven into present, past and future, does the possibility arise of agreeing on something permanent.”<sup>28</sup> Here, I would suggest, lies a possible source for Levertov of the “resonance” in Hélicon’s reference to art being “his only body,” “his only future,” which she expresses when she says “the artist gives body and future to ‘the mysterious being.’”

A further reflection on the last part of the passage also opens a new perspective on Levertov’s conception of poetry. In affirming poetry’s “real-ization,” she rejects its merely referring to “an absent subject.”<sup>29</sup> Much of our language use is precisely a way to refer to “an absent subject.”<sup>30</sup> Language makes possible the process of “abstraction” by which we “manipulate” the world around us, the way we manipulate “reality,” if you will. It has been by means of sign-systems, and preeminently language, that human beings have come to control and dominate the world. Levertov—as well as Heidegger, and Hölderlin, and perhaps all poets—calls us back to a more fundamental relation to language. That is the relation of naming things.<sup>31</sup>

An important aspect of the fundamentally dialogical element in Levertov’s poetics comes to light in the way “The Origins of a Poem” sees one aspect of the poet’s role:

Man’s vital need for communion, his humanity’s being rooted in “conversation,” is due to the fact that since living things, and

parts of living things, atrophy if not exercised in their proper functions and since man does contain, among his living parts, the complementary dualities of Needer and Maker, he must engage them if they are not to deteriorate.<sup>32</sup>

This is an elaboration of what she had said a bit earlier: “The poet develops the basic human need for dialogue in concretions that are audible to others; in listening, others are stimulated into awareness of their own needs and capacities, stirred into taking up their own dialogues, which are so often neglected.”<sup>33</sup> By “realizing” in our common language aspects of both the inner dialogue, and our dialogue with each other and the world, Levertov argues, the poet “stimulates” our “needs and capacities.”

One can look almost anywhere in Levertov’s poetry to see this complex dialectic of inner and outer, individual and communal, and language “realizing” not only the poet’s but the readers’ needs and capacities as well. “Missing Beatrice”<sup>34</sup> is only one of numerous dialogues with an absent other that is meant to “realize” both the speaker and that person’s relation to the poet and the world. An informal elegy, this poem—thanks to its rich yet enigmatic metaphors—does not have to be explicitly related to the real person of which it speaks.<sup>35</sup> The poem itself “creates” the reality of that person and—perhaps even more important—an atmosphere both descriptive and mysteriously suggestive of a transcendent reality.

The first six lines describe someone caring and responsive to others, warm to the pitch of “fever.” Beatrice comforts others, figuratively sending them home with “a shawl,” meantime retaining her own “goodness” like a “fire at the bone.” As “shawl” and “fire” begin to develop a vaguely “peasant” atmosphere, the final metaphor anticipates the sense of mystery on which the rest of the poem will elaborate. How can goodness be a fire? And what would it mean to be, or have, a “fire at the bone”? The second set of six lines complicates the impression by suggesting that Beatrice was both innocent *and* savvy. It is the effectiveness of Levertov’s

rhetoric to assert the “savviness” first: “You knew/ more than was good for you.” Paradoxically referred to as “peat-bog water,” “subtle,” “dark,” “cold,” and “pure,” Beatrice’s innocence is no simple quality. Contrasted to the warmth of goodness, this savvy “innocence” creates an even more complex impression of Beatrice, one that borders on the mysterious or—as Emmanuel Levinas might say—the irreducibility of the person. Such irreducibility is also a hint of the transcendent. The third group of lines elaborates the metaphors of the first two sections, combining the ambience of bog created in the second with the idea of fire in the first; all of this in a short three lines. Beatrice’s friends were in the habit of taking advantage of her kindness, figuratively cutting “an endless supply from you/ like turf from a bog.” Described here in metaphoric terms that complicate the mysteries of Beatrice’s character, the three lines represent a moment’s “consolidation” before the enigmatic climax.

The last six lines suggest Beatrice’s passing. With her death, all that remains is “smoke” from an “empty hearth,” and the words she spoke. It is as if we are left in an empty cottage on the heath soon after someone’s departure. Tapping an almost archetypal image, the speaker obliquely refers to Beatrice’s words as water “cupped in our hands to drink.” With a single, subtle metaphor, Levertov suggests the life-giving, thirst-quenching quality of Beatrice’s words—simultaneously completing another aspect of the poem’s “peasant” ambience. The last three lines are perhaps the most straightforward since the opening. But the idea suggested only adds to the mystery. With Beatrice gone the speaker seems to realize for the first time: “we never really saw you.” Understood in a conventional sense, it is almost a cliché, but as the culminating lines of a poem as full of mystery as “Missing Beatrice,” this last sentence suggests something like an unaccountable “disappearance.” Beatrice, this good, kind, and innocent person has suddenly—almost like an apparition on the moors—disappeared from sight, leaving only the most suggestive

evidence of ever having been. The irreducible otherness of persons *is*, indeed, an intimation of spiritual transcendence.

Levertov's idea of language achieves what Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests in the following passage:

In comparison with all other linguistic and nonlinguistic tradition, the work of art is the absolute present for each particular present, and at the same time holds its word in readiness for every future. The intimacy with which the work of art touches us is at the same time, in enigmatic fashion, a shattering and a demolition of the familiar. It is not only the "This art thou!" disclosed in a joyous and frightening shock; it also says to us; "Thou must alter thy life!"<sup>36</sup>

Due to her sense of the relation between language and being, there is a strong dialogical element in Levertov's poetry, and this element affects the kind of reading her poetry requires. Levertov's implicit theory of poetry is one in which language hews closely to reality by reflecting our perceptions and the experience of living in the world.<sup>37</sup> Her most recent poetry then asks: How can we confront a world of cyberspace, virtual reality, and inhuman practices? Her answer: By attentiveness to things and by a care with language that comprehends reverence, craft, care, and an acknowledgment of spirit and transcendence.

### *III. The World*

Even if she had not been moved by the political upheavals of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, Levertov's poetry would still have faced up to the challenges and the dangers of modernity become postmodernity. She had lived through the end of the Great Depression and a world war. She had suffered the estrangement—and then the loss—of her sister Olga; later, that of her husband. She had a deep and profound sense of the many ways in which human beings inhabit a "fallen" world.<sup>38</sup> It might be well to remind ourselves, as we

approach the final part of this paper, of Levertov's own sense of the links among the ideas that make up her sense of reality.

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."<sup>39</sup>

To begin my concluding section, I quote George Steiner, one of the few critics Levertov cared to read:<sup>40</sup>

I sense that we shall not come home to the facts of our unhousedness, of our eviction from a central humanity in the face of the tidal provocations of political barbarism and technocratic servitude, if we do not redefine, if we do not re-experience, the life of meaning in the text, in music, in art. We must come to recognize, and the stress is on *re*-cognition, a meaningfulness which is that of a freedom of giving and of reception beyond the constraints of immanence.<sup>41</sup>

Levertov re-cognizes meaningfulness, even on the edge of meaninglessness. "The Absentee," a poem from *Breathing the Water* thematizes this recognition.<sup>42</sup> The poem's theme is the interpretability of phenomena and behavior.

The poem describes the discovery of a fallen bird's nest. Though the scene seems stark, almost haunted by absence, close attention to the way in which the words and lines create that sense makes one aware of certain "traces," as it were, of a spirit that helps make sense of the events described. Like certain poems of Paul Celan or Adrienne Rich, "The Absentee" seems to point simultaneously to a rich potential for meaning even as it acknowledges, through its attentiveness to precise detail and implications, the possible meaninglessness of everyday life. Even in the most minimalist kind of mood,

an experience—like finding a fallen bird’s nest—if carefully attended to, can mean intensely and, by implication, can mean good.

As I move to the final section of my discussion, I would recall the nightmare vision—of cybernetics and the like—with which I began. Denise Levertov’s poetry and thought stand against the self-destructive tendencies of our postmodern epoch more than that of many twentieth-century writers. Literally unhoused at times in her life, and always recalling or conscious of the peace of house and home, she reminds us of the feeling of loss and homelessness, even as she warns us to resist being reshaped or transformed by forces that would diminish our humanity. While political activism is also an option, the more durable, sustainable form of this resistance is our fundamental ability to respond in wonder and reverence, at the same time we celebrate with gratitude<sup>43</sup> what the world is and what we human beings have wrought. In a poem, “After *Mindwalk*,” from *Evening Train*,<sup>44</sup> she records her shock at the sense of alienation which Bernt Capra’s profoundly disturbing movie (the “*Mindwalk*” of the title) records.

In syntax that strains against grammar, the poem “celebrates,” often in highly ironic fashion, the ascendancy of “process” as the way we understand the universe today. In a quantum world where “‘large’ and ‘small’ are bereft/of meaning, since not matter but process, process only,/ gathers itself to appear/ knowable,” the speaker records “what we feel/ in moments of bleak arrest,” in what she calls “a new twist of Pascal’s dread.” The remainder of the poem focuses on the “shift of scrutiny” that occurs when we discover “with- in our own atoms, inside the least/ particle of what we supposed/ our moral selves . . . bits of the Void left over from before/ the Fiat Lux.” Levertov’s critique of a post-Einsteinian world finds amplification in her comments to an interviewer who had asked about the effect of “virtual reality” on language.

The reason I want to talk about the word “virtual” is that it struck me the other day that a generation is now growing up

with all this cyber-technology, and that the whole concept of virtual experience as it has developed and is being manifested is absolutely anti-incarnational.<sup>45</sup>

“After *Mindwalk*” is a profoundly disturbing poem. It presents an ecological and spiritual poet facing the challenge of a scientific paradigm that purports to be deeply “ecological,” at the same time as it strives to cast off the bodily limitations of human understanding. The opening essay in Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* had warned of this state of affairs more than forty years ago.

In her second-to-last volume of poetry<sup>46</sup> Levertov returns to some of her most familiar, and most deeply insightful themes: attention to nature, gratitude, and the mystery of God’s love. In poem after poem—“In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being” (107), “Conversion of Brother Lawrence” (111), “A Blessing” (122), “Sands of the Well” (124), and “To Live in the Mercy of God” (127) to name just a few—perception combined with the poet’s awareness of the inner power of language evoke a sense of revelation in reality for which her best poetry is known. It is in these latest poems, too, that the recognition of transcendence and explicitly Christian mystery reaches its fullness.

“In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being” appears to be grounded in the close observation of birds—not to mention an awareness of birds in literature. Levertov loved to watch and talk about birds, especially owls.<sup>47</sup> But here such observations form an oblique perspective for her own metaphoric flight. The poem begins with birds, like Hopkins’ kestrel, “afloat in air’s current.” But the thought of “air’s current” quickly elicits the thought of *pneuma*, the wind of the Spirit. And audaciously pressing the theological figure, she suggests that this breath is not the breath *of* God but God’s very Being. Then, in another bold (but theologically sound) metaphoric inference, God becomes “the air enveloping the whole / globe of being.”

But then the poet imagines ordinary human beings breathing in this breath that is God, yet, like birds who “cower / in cliff-crevice or edge out gingerly,” she contrasts them to “the saints” who “take flight.” With another, clearer allusion to Hopkins’ windhover, she pictures the “holy ones riding / that ocean of air” and concludes the poem with a reassurance that enacts the regular rhythm of breathing and heartbeat. Even those timid human beings are protected as they continue to “inhale, exhale, inhale / encompassed, encompassed.” Like the sense of being sustained, suspended, and supported that runs through many of her poems, “In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being” realizes the grateful sense of God’s sustaining love.

“A Blessing” is a nature poem, but one simplified, like a twentieth century canvas by Cézanne devoted to a single scene. With a painter’s eye the speaker locates some sixteen poplars, “embraced” by “hovering light” against the background of “a curtain of conifers.” The second verse paragraph suggests that these trees have taken on an almost dream-like reality, due in part to “a change of perception.” Suggesting that the speaker has undergone a time of illness or trouble, the paragraph ends with an allusion to someone returning to health. The third verse paragraph realizes as it records the transformation that has taken place in the appearance of the trees, and the light that rests on them. The language is fraught with religious connotation. The “hovering light” is “a nimbus now”—a halo. It is said to “embrace without pressure of weight” and is called “compassionate light.” Whether dismissed as pathetic fallacy or praised for its spiritual intuition, the poem’s strategy, veritably “discovered” in the nuanced repetition of the light’s “embrace,” is as subtle and attentive to accurate perception as that in any of Levertov’s other poems. Like “In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being,” “A Blessing” also embodies Williams’ dictum, “no ideas except in things,” as it plays with the weight that ideas concretely realized can give to words. An embrace without pressure or weight is both a subtle perception and an intimation of an idea that has the subtle profundity of a religious revelation.

“Sands of the Well” is another subtle meditation on the mystery of God’s Being and love. Like “In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being,” the poem’s literal subject seems part perception and part “envisioned pool.” The short lines describe “the golden particles” that settle to the bottom of a well of clear water. Watching the grains of sand “descend, descend,” the speaker, through words and rhythm, enacts—and allows the reader to experience—the focusing of attention that becomes the ground of meditation. At the end of the particles’ “full descent,” the speaker notes that the “water’s / absolute transparency / is complete.”

The speaker then asks whether such transparency is not in fact the condition of all perception. Stirring the water again, the speaker gazes attentively, meditatively, until the sand settles, and she is faced with “the mystery / of that sheer / clarity.” The long final sentence ends in a question, suspended in a distant echo of both the rhythm and something of the visionary idea that concludes John Keats’ nightingale ode.<sup>48</sup> Here, too, the conflating of light, air, and water imagery recalls “In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being” and becomes a subtle image of a reality that, in its mystery, suggests the transcendent.

“To Live in the Mercy of God” is perhaps the most audacious of the selections from *Sands of the Well*. Assuming the kind of unusual perspective found in many of her poems—including “Salvator Mundi” and “Ascension,” not to mention “After *Mindwalk*”—the speaker of this poem describes the view of trees seen when a person is lying down. From this perspective it is as if the speaker imagines falling upward until, only near the top, the “ribs of shelter / open.” The second group of lines reflects on the phrase, “To live in the mercy of God.” The speaker is reminded of the tree roots upon which she lies. Like the words of the phrase, the tree roots have “no give,” are “elbows of / stony wood.” This hardness appears to motivate the sense of awe with which the third group of lines begins. And, paradoxically, the hardness of the sense of awe itself becomes

“a form of comfort.” In the next lines the speaker seeks to realize the form of comfort that awe provides. It is, she says, like the air upholding flying foxes or the saltwater capable of bearing the human body up, if—like the timid birds of the earlier poem—“you dared.” Repeating the phrase, “To live in the mercy of God” like a meditative mantra (or the practice of *Lectio Divina*), the second part of the poem imagines an intensification of this sustaining mystery. God’s mercy becomes a “waterfall flinging itself / unabated down and down.” The speaker reflects upon the “swiftness of the plunge” and the sound of the waterfall.<sup>49</sup> She then imagines breathing the spray, thus bringing full circle the fluid imagery of air and water.

Of course this latter reading leaves unresolved some of the subtle ambiguities and tensions that “To Live in the Mercy of God” contains. Yet it is now necessary to turn to Levertov’s posthumous volume of poems, *This Great Unknowing*.<sup>50</sup> This last volume contains a number of poems that further complicate as they enrich our understanding of what Levertov suggests about the relation of the poet, language, the world, and the transcendent. A single example with which to conclude this discussion is “Translucence” (48), a poem from which Levertov’s executor chose a phrase to name the volume.

“Translucence” uses the analogy of “the half-opaque whiteness / of Japanese screens or lampshades” to convey a sense of the “luminous” “holiness” of people in whom “the light we intuit / is of the already resurrected.” Playing on the subtle difference between transparency (the theme apparent in so many of the previous poems) and translucence, Levertov is able to suggest the ambiguous benefit of this state. Of these seemingly resurrected individuals she can say: “They know of themselves nothing different / from anyone else. This great unknowing / is part of their holiness.” The poem is all hesitancy and tentativeness, as if—like Steiner urging our tentative recognition of beauty—the poet can at best hold tenuously to the insight of such translucent holiness. While she praises the childlike innocence that seems to radiate from such faces, it is as if both poet

and language remain aware of the tension between the reality of innocence and the ways in which such innocence appears to others less innocent. Only the final, but no less complicated sentence articulates part of that essence of innocence. And here, too, it helps to see the sentence as a further gloss on the insight provided by “Missing Beatrice”: “They are always trying / to share out joy as if it were cake or water, / something ordinary, not rare at all.”

All Levertov’s work manifests such deep but subtle tensions, even contradictions. Such tensions suggest that a dialectical mode of understanding is necessary for appreciating her poetry. The poems acknowledge the desire to give oneself to the reality of an experience; but also a desire to remain aloof and observing. There is an appropriative—assertive—element, particularly in Levertov’s political poetry, but also a strong striving for integration, often at a level that one can only call transcendent. She speaks so lovingly and appreciatively of being grateful for joy—and happiness<sup>51</sup>—because she had known and experienced anguish, pain, frustration, and even rage. Her poetry moves us because it arises from a graceful sense of vocation that acknowledges the giftedness of the world, perception, and the poet’s ability to discern and articulate in language—which is the only homeland—that good, that beauty, and that truth that is the poet’s eloquent affirmation of graced reality in a world sustained by the Transcendent.

### Notes

1. Denise Levertov, *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 134.
2. “An Interview with Denise Levertov,” *Renascence* 50:1–2 (Fall 1997/Winter 1998): 14–15.
3. *Ibid.*, 8–9.
4. Denise Levertov, *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 173.
5. This essay assumes many of the positions that Hannah Arendt takes in critiquing the modern, technological world. See *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); also *The Life of the Mind* 2 vols. (1971; reprint., New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978).

6. Wallace Stegner, "Crow Country," in *American Places*, ed. Wallace Stegner, Page Stegner, and John McCrae III (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981), 110.
7. Denise Levertov, *Evening Train* (New York: New Directions, 1993), 69.
8. Albert Gelpi, "Two Notes on Denise Levertov and the Romantic Tradition," in *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 91.
9. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1992), 43–44.
10. "Oracles," in Denise Levertov, *Tesserae* (New York: New Directions, 1995), 95–99.
11. "Interview with Denise Levertov," 5.
12. Levertov, *New and Selected Essays*, 231–38.
13. Emily Archer, "A Conversation with Denise Levertov," *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion* No. 18 (1998): 63, 64.
14. Though a number of her essays, like "An Autobiographical Sketch" (in *New and Selected Essays*) provide insight into her past, *Tesserae* is—until we have a full-blown biography based on unpublished material—probably the single most important source.
15. Denise Levertov, *Light Up the Cave* (New York: New Directions, 1981), 36.
16. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 42.
17. J. L. Lowes' way of exploring the derivation of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" is the sort of study that many of Levertov's more allusive poems invite.
18. Denise Levertov, *Candles in Babylon* (New York: New Directions, 1982), 101.
19. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 44.
20. Levertov, *New and Selected Essays*, 128.
21. Archer, "A Conversation with Denise Levertov," 59.
22. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 43.
23. Levertov, *New and Selected Essays*, 136.
24. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 49.
25. Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry," in *European Literary Theory and Practice*, ed. Vernon W. Gras (New York: Delta, 1973), 27–42.
26. Richard Jackson, "A Common Time: The Poetry of Denise Levertov," *Sagetrieb* 5.2 (1986), 5–46.
27. Heidegger, 32.
28. *Ibid.*, 33.
29. This denial helps explain another thematic fascination of her poetry: the seemingly postmodern fascination with "absence." The dialectic of presence and absence is everywhere evident in her poetry, right up to the last two volumes. I merely refer to the poems on Mount Rainier in *Evening Train*, and the poems like "The Danger Moments" and "Empty Hands" in *Sands of the Well*.
30. It would not be hard to invoke Jacques Lacan or Kristeva-on-Lacan to explain Levertov's theory of language as being related to the psycholinguistic theory that says that human language begins as a substitute for the absent mother. But one need not follow that whole argument to grasp the kernel of truth.
31. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Nature of Things and the Language of Things," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 69–81.

32. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 49–50.
33. *Ibid.*, 49.
34. Denise Levertov, *Breathing the Water* (New York: New Directions, 1983), 24.
35. In a letter of November 28, 1998, Levertov's literary executor, Paul Lacey, identifies Beatrice as "Beatrice Hawley, a poet about her own age whom Denise encouraged to publish."
36. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 104.
37. Levertov is Arendtian in her view of the self. We are who we are by speaking and acting, and our speaking and acting either betray or confirm our being. See Levertov's references to self vs. world in William Carlos Williams' poem, "The Farmer" ("The Ideas in the Things," *New and Selected Essays*, 46–47).
38. In a curious, autobiographical piece from about 1955 ("The Pardoner" in *The Poet in the World*), she describes what was probably a stuffed toy, inherited from Olga—a transitional object, if you will—whose loss takes away someone who pardoned all. She reflects on the feeling of loss, and what it is "to live in the suspense of unpardonedness, simply to live." From her reflections on Hopkins and William Carlos Williams—not to mention the frequent mention of artists and writers like Cézanne, Ibsen, Wordsworth, Héliou, Cid Corman, et al.—we see the place that the historical world, no less than the world of literary and other "cultural objects" has.
39. Levertov, *Poet in the World*, 55.
40. "An Interview with Denise Levertov," 11.
41. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 50.
42. Levertov, *Breathing the Water*, 24.
43. She would also add that we might also need to raise our voices in anger, or act in outrage.
44. Levertov, *Evening Train*, 105.
45. Archer, "A Conversation with Denise Levertov," 58.
46. Denise Levertov, *Sands of the Well* (New York: New Directions, 1996).
47. "An Interview with Denise Levertov," 8.
48. The lines referred to read: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music—Do I wake or sleep?"
49. The "O or Ah" recall the enraptured sigh of A.N. in "In Memory: After a Friend's Sudden Death," *Breathing the Water*, 24.
50. Denise Levertov, *The Great Unknowing: Last Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1999).
51. See "The Way It Is" in Denise Levertov, *The Freeing of the Dust* (New York: New Directions, 1975), 47.