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## The Poet's "Caressive Sight:" Denise Levertov's Transactions with Nature

Małgorzata Poks  
*English Teacher Training College, Sosnowiec*

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**Małgorzata Poks**

English Teacher Training College,  
Sosnowiec

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# ABSTRACT

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The scientific consciousness which broke with the holistic perception of life is credited with "unweaving the rainbow," or disenchanting the world. No longer perceived as sacred, the non-human world of plants and animals became a site of struggle for domination and mastery in implementing humankind's supposedly divine mandate to subdue the earth. The nature poetry of Denise Levertov is an attempt to reverse this trend, reaffirm the sense of wonder inherent in the world around us, and reclaim some "holy presence" for the modern sensibility. Her exploratory poetics witnesses to a sense of relationship existing between all creatures, both human and non-human. This article traces Levertov's "transactions with nature" and her evolving spirituality, inscribing her poetry within the space of alternative—or romantic—modernity, one that dismantles the separation paradigm. My intention throughout was to trace the way to a religiously defined faith of a person raised in the modernist climate of suspicion, but keenly attentive to spiritual implications of beauty and open to the epiphanies of everyday.

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## ABSTRACT

Denise Levertov believed that all things are orderly and lovely and that the poet's task was to reveal their beauty. The "caressive sight," defined by her as "my poet's sight I was given / that it might stir me to song," is a tool

of poetic exploration and has the power to penetrate to the inner form, or inner truth of all objects (*Selected Poems* 91). For Levertov, as she wrote in “Some Notes on Organic Form,” poetry is “a method of apperception, i.e., of recognizing what we perceive, and is based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partake, and of which man’s creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories. Such a poetry is exploratory” (*New and Selected Essays* 168). Her poetry testifies over and over again that what the eye discovers is *relationship* rather than alienation. The leitmotif of her work is the recognition (and re-cognition) of a deep affinity between all things. Humans, animals, plants, even inanimate nature—this ultimate world of matter that Kantian philosophy declared irreconcilable with the world of the spirit—all belong to a network of relationships, an organic whole that cannot be reduced to a simple sum of parts. In a way, Levertov’s organic poetry can be seen as a literary equivalent of Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy in its recognition that it is events as opposed to isolated objects or occasions that are the genuine building blocks of reality.

As befits a late Romantic, Levertov frequently found the world brutal, confusing, ambivalent, but would nevertheless keep loving it, trusting that “what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth” (*Selected Poems* 6). True to this declaration, she would follow her imagination “much as the [sniffing] dog” who goes “intently haphazard,” wholly engaged in his perceptions.

There’s nothing  
the dog disdains on his way,  
nevertheless he  
keeps moving, changing  
pace and approach but  
not direction—“every step an arrival . . .” (*Selected Poems* 7)

as she says in an early poem, finding the animal’s unfailing sense of orientation analogous to the way poetic imagination works.

Levertov’s poems on nature are permeated with a sense of wonder and sensuous joy. She delights in describing *encounters* with nature, sometimes wishing human relations were structured on the same I-Thou relationship that she finds inherent in the natural world. In her poem entitled “About Marriage,” for instance, she complains of being locked “in wedlock” when what she desires is “marriage, an encounter,” like her afternoon encounter with three birds of passage. The birds simply acknowledged her presence and “let [her] be near them,” while she “stood / a half hour under the enchantment” (*Selected Poems* 39–40). On another occasion, rejecting

the trope of domination and mastery over nature that plagues the post-Enlightenment frame of mind, the poet refuses to reduce the cat on her knee to a metaphor. "I-Thou, cat, I-Thou," she repeats, in obedience to the "flex and reflex of claws gently . . . sustain[ing] their own tune, / not mine" (*Selected Poems* 4).

Listening for decades to crickets fervently practicing "their religion of ecstasy" (*Selected Poems* 98), seeing in a skein of geese a "hieratic arrow" converging "toward the point of grace" (*Life* 35), discovering in "the sightless trees without braincells . . . a consciousness undefined" (*Life* 35), the poet would frequently experience inexplicable joy simply by "coming into animal presence," as the title of one of her poems puts it. Enacted within the space of encounter, the verse witnesses to Levertov's recognition of creatures *as* creatures, beyond accumulated cultural constructions. This is made clear in the poem's opening fragment, which praises the serpent—usually associated with satanic deceit—as a most guileless of animals. Looking at a white rabbit "twitching his ears in the rain," a llama who "mildly disregards human approval," an "insouciant armadillo" hurrying across a track and feeling unthreatened by her presence, she realizes that her joy comes from finding herself face to face with "holy presence." "Those who were sacred have remained so," declares Levertov, "holiness does not dissolve, it is a presence / of bronze, *only the sight that saw it / faltered and turned from it*" (*Selected Poems* 19). This is a crucial realization. The poet attributes the modernist disenchantment of nature to a *failure of sight*, a human error of epistemological nature. This realization makes the scientific, non-participatory consciousness that has broken with the pre-modern, holistic perception of life a consequence of a *reluctance* to see ("the sight that saw it / faltered and turned from it"); in short: it is a purposeful blindness whose most recent consequence is the ecological disaster.

This theme is addressed explicitly in another Levertov poem on nature entitled "Tragic Error," a manifesto of environmental stewardship. Using the Genesis story of creation as her point of departure, she engages in ideological decreation of the divine charge to, supposedly, "subdue" the earth, a charge that, according to her, was "miswritten, misread" (*Life* 12). Psalm 24, also evoked in the poem, claims that the earth is the Lord's. This would mean that we are—or rather were to have been—the earth's *stewards*, not masters, ever accountable for our deeds to the earth's rightful owner. Instead of subduing, we should have dressed and kept it like Eden's Garden. "*Subdue*," concludes the poet, "was the false, the misplaced word in the story" (*Life* 12). In her reading, humans have committed a tragic error. Instead of alienating ourselves from nature, objectifying and destroying it,

we should have treated it in organic terms, in terms of reciprocity, since—as Levertov believes—the world is our body and we are its consciousness, its “reflective source” uniquely capable of responding to the mute plea of creation for identity; a plea for recognition of each creature’s particularity, a plea for a *name*. “*That* would have been our *dominion*,” declares Levertov,

to be those cells of earth’s body that could  
perceive and imagine, could bring the planet  
into the haven it is to be known,  
(as the eye blesses the hand, perceiving  
its form and the work it can do). (*Life* 12)

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One feels that her poetry is a reparation for this tragic error and an attempt to reclaim the “holy presence” for the modern sensibility as an *abiding* presence, as indestructible as bronze.

This struggle is perhaps most explicit in a series of poems on Mt. Rainier, the monumental but elusive mountain which haunted Levertov since her move to Seattle in 1992 until the end of her life in 1997. Sometimes Mt. Rainier is a clear presence towering over the horizon; at other times it is a mirage, a ghostly apparition. But there are times when it is completely absent, “a remote folk memory,” “*Deus absconditus*” (*Life* 60)—but no less real for its hiddenness. Absence is not the negation of presence, but, in keeping with the logic of contrariness characteristic of Romantic Modernity, absence is another mode of presence—it partakes of the *via negativa* of the mystical experience; it is a purification and a testing of faith. In the dark night of the senses only the “remote . . . memory” preserves traces of realities hidden from the conscious eye.

Yet, it is not only the mountain that hides or is absent. It is often the poet herself who is hidden from it “in veils of inattention, apathy, fatigue,” as she writes in “Witness” (*Life* 70). This poem reconfirms Levertov’s life-long conviction she once expressed by using the words of William Blake as an epigraph to her 1967 poem “The Closed World”: “If the Perceptive Organs close, their Objects seem to close also” (*Selected Poems* 62). Thus, what Levertov suggests over and over again is that beauty, truth, sense, holiness, order, form—everything is still there, it is only our sight that “falter[s] and turn[s] from it.”

Levertov was particularly sensitive to the epiphanies of the prosaic and the transitory. “Hold fast what seem ephemera,” she urges, echoing William Carlos Williams. What appears to be “nothing much” can be “everything; all depends / on how you regard it / On *if* you regard it” (*Life* 74). She understood that the ordinary has an extraordinary potential for epiphany, for triggering moments which not only intensify life, but result in a changed awareness, a clarification of life’s meaning. At times such

clarifications remain on the level of tacit knowledge—felt, visceral, but not rising to the level of articulation. Like the one in "A Reward," a poem whose persona, having experienced a spell of restlessness and desolation, searches in the natural world "for what might lift me back to what I had fallen away from" (*Life* 52). But she feels even more alienated in the silence of the falling night, with all the creatures preparing for the night's sleep, withdrawing from her "into their secrets." On the point of giving up, however, a reward comes: a heron she has not seen for weeks, comes flying in her direction to "[take] up his vigil." "If you ask / why this cleared a fog from my spirit," she confesses, somewhat helplessly, "I have no answer" (*Life* 52). As she suggests elsewhere, the sense of spiritual alleviation must have come from a momentary breakthrough to a "world parallel to our own though overlapping" (*Life* 75), as she phrases it, both identifying and resisting the modernist separation paradigm. The "parallel world" is depicted as "devoid / of our preoccupations, free / from apprehension—though affected, / certainly, by our actions" (*Life* 75). Self-forgetfulness and openness—Levertov prefers to talk of *responsiveness*—to being, a kind of Eckhartian-Heideggerian *Gelassenheit*, is prerequisite for what the author calls "sojourns in the parallel world." Such epiphanic moments are troped as liberation of the poet's "inner child," liberation from bondage to routine and mechanical repetition: "something tethered / in us, hobbled like a donkey on its patch / of gnawed grass and thistles, breaks free," she muses. Of course such moments cannot last, we fall back "into our own sphere (where we must return, indeed, to evolve our destinies)," but we are no longer the same. The sublime experience leaves an indelible mark on our psyche, a residuum of otherness that totally eludes rationalization: "we have changed, a little," concludes the poet (*Life* 76).

Levertov's poem "Sojourns in the Parallel World" seems to have captured the essence of what Charles Taylor calls the epiphany of modernism in his monumental work *Sources of the Self*. The ecstatic moment of total responsiveness to and absorption in "that insouciant life" of nature means that the self's *agon* with the modernistically disenchanting world becomes briefly suspended, superseded by an unrestrained exchange, a sense of reciprocity. A new charm restores harmony between the self, routinely living in a state of anxiety, and the "parallel world" of insouciant nature. The in-scape of the epiphany eludes an immediate conceptual grasp, though. What is needed is repetition. To make sense of the sublime experience, it must be recreated—the experience of connectedness has to be recaptured (even if only imaginatively) and articulated.

The mechanism of such repetition is the theme of "First Love," one of Levertov's last poems. Gazing at a flower, the poet becomes suddenly reminded of two overlapping childhood experiences. First, there is a vague

recollection of her infant self being drawn to another, unknown and unnamed infant: “I had an obscure desire to become connected in some way to this other,” says Levertov,

even to *be* what I faltered after, falling  
to hands and knees, crawling  
a foot or two, clambering  
up to follow further until  
arms swooped down to bear me away. (*Selected Poems* 195)

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Her early dramatic struggle to be connected, which would trope her later endeavours to recover the sense of oneness with all being, was stopped short by her mother’s solicitous care. On that occasion the other had “left no face, had exchanged no gaze with me” (*Selected Poems* 195). In her mature life, however, an obscure recollection of this no-face (that of the unnamed infant) is triggered by the sight of the flower, which itself is reminiscent of still another “face”: the upturned face of a flower seen in childhood, when the poet was “barely / old enough to ask and repeat its name,” a flower “looking completely, openly into my eyes” that her mother called “convolvulus” (*Selected Poems* 196). This time a rapport was established, a name was uttered:

It looked at me, I looked  
back, delight  
filled me as if  
I, not the flower,  
were a flower and were brimful of rain.  
*And there was endlessness.* (*Selected Poems* 196)

This encounter transfigures both the speaker and her surroundings. In the exchange of the glance (“face upturned”), a recognition of the other, as well as herself as grounded in the other, takes place. Becoming the other in this transfiguring epiphany of being frees the poet from the tyranny of time and the burden of history. But this experience, too, remains unarticulated (or simply forgotten) until that later epiphany which retrieves the earlier one on a new level: “This flower,” muses the ageing poet: “suddenly / there was *Before I saw it*, the vague / past, and *Now. Forever*” (*Selected Poems* 195). She is evidently still groping for words to express the inscape of an experience too sublime for words.

Perhaps through a lifetime what I’ve desired  
has always been to return  
to that endless giving and receiving, the wholeness

of that attention,  
that once-in-a-lifetime  
secret communion. (*Selected Poems* 196)

This return is not easy since it happens as a *gift*, it cannot be willed. "Repetition is a gift of deliverance," says philosopher Edward F. Mooney commenting on Kierkegaard's category of repetition, "we are less the clever constructors of repetition than its patient recipients." On those rare occasions when repetition does take place, though, the perceptive organs open again, the inner child breaks free, life is experienced as intrinsically good and the world of contingency and flux becomes a home again, even if only for a moment.

"Days pass when I forget this mystery," confesses Levertov in "Primary Wonder," another poem from her posthumous 1998 collection entitled *Sands of the Well*. Forgetfulness about being, entanglement in everyday preoccupations and conflicting desires are characteristic of the sphere where we "evolve our destinies." This obviously implies expulsion from that endlessness experienced in the epiphanic moment in which eternity intersects time; the fall into temporality is a fall from grace. But repetition is a means of redemption and a restoration of grace; it is a second charm. Whenever "the throng's clamor / recedes," continues Levertov, "once more the quiet mystery / is present to me": "the mystery that there is anything, anything at all, / let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything, / rather than void" (*Selected Poems* 192).

In the context of the above analysis, it is not surprising that the last lines of the poem should read: "and that, O Lord, / Creator, Hallowed One, You still, / hour by hour sustain it" (*Selected Poems* 192). In the 1980s Levertov, the intuitively religious poet, ever sensitive to the sacredness of all beings, defined herself as a Christian, though her Christianity continued to be unorthodox, suspended between belief and doubt. She liked to allude to David Jones's belief in "the artist's impulse gratuitously to set up altars to the unknown god." "Later," she claims, "that unknown began to be defined for me as God, and further, as God revealed in the Incarnation" (*Selected Essays* 241). Since a full-scale treatment of this theme would radically transcend the scope of this essay, quoting the concluding lines of "Primary Wonder," I only wish to point to a certain logic in the development of Levertov's poetic vision, as well as inscribe her "transactions with nature" within the space of Romantic Modernity. It seems to me that the author of *The Life Around Us* interestingly illustrates the thesis that modernist spirituality is more than just an oxymoron.

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