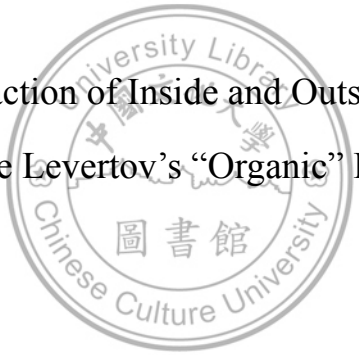
中國文化大學英國語文學研究所
碩士論文

Master of Arts Thesis
Graduate Institute of English Language and Literature
Chinese Culture University

內在與外在的互動－
論丹妮絲・萊維妥夫之「有機詩」



Interaction of Inside and Outside：
Denise Levertov's "Organic" Poetry

指導教授：丁善雄
Advisor: Professor Shan-Hsiung Ting

研 究 生：鄭素玲
Graduate Student: Su-Ling Cheng

中華民國 99 年 1 月
January 2010

內在與外在的互動－

論丹妮絲・萊維妥夫之「有機詩」

Interaction of Inside and Outside:

Denise Levertov's "Organic" Poetry

A Thesis Submitted to

the Graduate Institute of English Language and Literature

Chinese Culture University

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

by

鄭素玲(Su-Ling, Cheng)

January 2010

中 國 文 化 大 學

碩 士 學 位 論 文

內在與外在的互動－
論丹妮絲・萊維妥夫之「有機詩」

研究生： 鄭素玲

經考試合格特此證明

口試委員：

指導教授： 丁善雄教授

所　　長：

口 試 日 期 ： 中 華 民 國　98　年　12　月　26　日

Table of Contents

Interaction of Inside and Outside:

Denise Levertov's "Organic" Poetry

Abstract

This thesis will offer an in-depth study of Denise Levertov's poetic meanings, form and devices, in particular, her "organic poetry," a concept established upon a full knowledge of the art and life that she brought up in 1950s. Levertov devoted her whole career to research poetic art and explore the spirit of art throughout her life. Levertov believed that the poet should have sharp eyes to view common things in life, and to find out the balance that exits between the ideal and the real. As James F. Mersmann has pointed out, "Levertov's poetry is a poetry of the eye in that it is concerned with seeing into experience and discovering the order and significance that her poet's faith tells her is really there behind the surface chaos." Levertov thought that there is a close correlation between art and life. Hence, in this thesis, I will also offer a detailed survey of Denise Levertov's life background, which has moulded her writing techniques.

When a writer devotes such attention to a single subject, I think this subject entails our consideration of an in-depth study. Many critics have studied the great emphasis Levertov placed on her organic poetry, but few studies have devoted themselves to studying her whole corpus. In this study, I attempt to interpret Levertov's perception of man's relation to organic poetry and her vivid images of her organic poetry within the twentieth-century social and cultural contexts.

In order to realize more about Denise Levertov's poetic skill, I will gather some of her early poems as well as her latest works to analyze the content and form of her "organic poetry." As a prolific writer, Levertov has published many collections of

poetry in which she scrutinizes many themes including self-being, gender, nature politics, and religion. This thesis is divided into seven chapters, each of which will analyze a part of the above topic respectively.

內在與外在的互動－論丹妮絲・萊維妥夫之「有機詩」

摘要

本論文將對丹妮絲・萊維妥夫的詩學理論做深入探討，特別針對她的重要學說「有機詩」提出說明及例證。她終其一生都在研究詩之美學，及探索詩中靈魂，她始終相信詩人應該俱備銳利之眼並以平凡事物入詩，而在理想及現實中取得平衡，對她而言，作詩和生活是密不可分的，所以，對於滋養她美學的生活背景，我將引領讀者給予一個完整呈現。丹妮絲・萊維妥夫早年的詩作與她後來接觸到多位美國詩人而深受其影響，詩風有了重大改變。本論文也將給予對照分析。再者，她可算是一位十分多產的詩人，一生詩作超過二十餘本，所含蓋的主題相當廣泛，本論文之篇章重點如下：

第一章 生平介紹及定義何謂「有機詩」

第二章 尋找自我身份價值

第三章 性別

第四章 生態自然

第五章 政治

第六章 宗教

第七章 結論：對詩人的詩學理論再加以闡明，並解釋作詩過程，如何內在與外在互動；另外再敍述所謂詩人角色做結論

Acknowledgements

While setting out to write this title, I realize that I need to pay more time than others to understand the implication of verses; especially, the contemporary poetry is regarded as recondite one that my classmates usually avoid not to do research on it. However, my advisor Prof. Ting Shan-Hsiung whose insight and comments pushed this thesis work toward great resolution gave me a very helpful reading to challenge such a topic, so I feel in particular a sense of gratitude toward him.

Furthermore, I want to thank my classmate, Arthur who gave me encouragement and sometime shared my pressures when I was impatient with those complicated theory of poetry. I also want to thank my family: my dearest mommy, my older sisters, and my loveable dog, Mei Mei. Without their supports, I would not be able to finish this thesis. Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my adorable mother.

Chapter One

Introduction

I. Denise Levertov's Life

A detailed introduction to Denise Levertov's life and works may help us to recognize that her poetry is an important voice in the twentieth century American avant-garde scene. In her very early age, Levertove demonstrated the talent for writing. In 1923, she was born in Ilford, Essex, England. Her father, Paul Philip Levertoff, was a Russian Jewish scholar who later became an Anglican parson and scholar dedicated to Jewish-Christian dialogue. Her mother, Beatrice Spooner-Jones, was a Welsh who had taught school, and was a great teacher. Her mother educated at home, giving her daily lessons. Levertov thought that the cultural environments of her family brought her up and trained her well to become a poet. Her parents never ignored her study and offered her a learning friendly atmosphere with a lot of books to grow up, and also arranged a few hours a day reading poetry to children. Levertov and her older sister Olga were asked to read the great works of the nineteenth century such as Stevenson, Tennyson, Keats, and Wordsworth. It is not difficult to imagine that these two sisters immersed themselves in a beneficial influence for writing talent and character development, so when she was five years old, she declared that she would like to become a writer in the future. Murray Bodo in Image Journal says, "From an early age she believed in her poetic abilities" (Web, 1999). After that, when at 12, she sent some poems to T.S. Eliot and got a two-page response from this great poet. T.S. Eliot's advice did evoke confidence in herself to become a writer.

Denise Levertov considered herself a poet very early and was aware of the role

of a poet. When she was nineteen, Levertov's first poem, "Listening to Distant Guns" in Poetry Quarterly, was published in 1942, during the World War Ⅱ. At the beginning of the wartime, she joined the "land army" and accepted an intensive program of nurses' training, called "Civil Nursing Reserve." However, when Levertov was interviewed by Sybil Estess, she said, "I did not go on to become a Registered Nurse because I didn't like the strain of taking even the one and only examination that I ever took in my life, and I didn't like the way in which one's personal life was regulated" (Estess 156). She knew her role as a poet, so during the wartime, she still continued writing and accused the war's disaster in her poetry. By then, the editor of the magazine, Wrey Gardiner, began to read her poems and expressed his appreciation, and decided to publish her works. Between seventeen and twenty-one years old, she published her first book, The Double Image, which was released in 1946. Many of the poems in this book conjured up the sentimentality and lushness to earn her the name of a "New Romantic." Levertov herself added that it "was a reaction, partly, to the daily life of wartime—the drabness and grayness of English in the early 1940s" (Estess 157).

Denise Levertovs developed from "a young British neo-romantic" poet to become a "mature, cosmopolitan" (Wagner 28). In 1948, she married American writer Mitchell Goodman and moved to New York. After she became an American, she started to adjust her writing style and tried to write the so-called American "open form" poetry. As Albert Gelpi says in " Introduction: Centering the Double Image," "American poetry whose open form and oral, performative character rejected the academic formalism of poets"(Gelpi 2). In America, she still continued her writing career. Lervertov began to be acquainted with the Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau, the formal experimentation of Ezra Pond, and William Carlos Williams

whose poetry and poetic power influenced Levertov the strongest. "Through him perhaps more than through anyone else she learned to see—and so to say—more precisely—more precisely, more consciously—more incisively"(Gelpi 2). Levertov also said that without Williams' s inspiration, "I could not have developed from a British Romantic with an almost Victorian background to an American poet of any vitality" (qtd. in Baym 2584). At almost the same time, she was introduced to the Black Mountain group of poets, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Charles Olson. Although she did not admit the categorization, critics think her as a member of the Black Mountain School. Her poems usually were carried in Black Mountain Review, and she got many readers' positive responses. After moving to America, Levertov soon departed from the literary circle of England, and developed a writing skill with an open style, whose method was derived from the Black Mountain Poets. In "Denise Levertov," James E. B. Breslin mentions, "Levertov is also defining her own place in modern American poetry: as a poet who had descended from Williams and Pond by way of Olson and Creeley" (56). In 1956, her first American book Here and Now was published; thereupon she immediately won an acknowledgement among American peers. Her next book, With Eyes at the Back of our Heads (1959), let her become, as POET.org from the Academy of American Poets describes on the Internet, "one of the great American poets, and her British origins were almost forgotten" (Web 2001).

In the 1960s, during the Vietnam War, she became politically involved with the antiwar movement, and began to state not to be a pacifist. So she gave up growing to be an unbearably smug and became more revolutionary. At that time, sadness and rage became her important theme. Her book, The Sorrow Dance, finished in 1967, which is full of the atmosphere of sorrow toward the war, and the death of her older

sister; one of the poems, “Life at War,” reflected her antiwar position. A few years later Levertov published many volumes of poetry including The Freeing the Dust (1975), Life in the Forest (1978), and Collected Earlier Poems (1979). At that time, she wrote a great quantity of political poems but her reputation began to decline; yet, in The Freeing the Dust, readers were moved by her sincere feelings, especially, her word power. As David Ignatow suggests, “Poems against the Vietnam War are still present, several of superb pathos, but beyond that are poems of a way of looking at life that we never before met in her works” (35). The Freeing the Dust won her the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize. Besides, she also won many awards including the Shelley Memorial Award, the Robert Frost Medal, the Lannan Award, and a Fellowship and a National Institute of Arts and Letters grant. From 1982 to 1993, she not only taught at Stanford University for eleven years, but also during that time she wrote many books such as Candles in Babylon (1982), Poems 1960-1967 (1983), Oblique Prayers: New Poems (1984), Poems1968-1972 (1987), Breathing the Water (1987), A Door in the Hive (1989), Evening Train (1992), and The Sands of the Well (1996). At last, she died from lymphoma on December 27, 1997, at 74. During her lifetime, from her first collection of verse in England, The Double Image (1946), to her last work, The Great Unknowing (1999), she had written more than twenty volumes of poems. Denise Levertov could be a prolific writer and her poetic achievement is obvious to all. “[T]he range and coherence of her large and still growing body of works and confirms her as a major poet of the second half of the twentieth century” (Gelpi 8).

Ⅱ. Denise Levertov’s “Organic Form”

Levertov devoted her whole career to research poetic art and explored the spirit

of art throughout her life. Levertov believed that the poet should have sharp eyes to view common things in life, and to find out the balance that exits between the ideal and the real. As James F. Mersmann points out, “Levertov’s poetry is a poetry of the eye in that it is concerned with seeing into experience and discovering the order and significance that her poet’s faith tells her is really there behind the surface chaos” (Web 1974). She described her own poetry as taking on an "organic form,” a concept established upon a full knowledge of the art and life she brought up in 1950s.

Readers would be impressed by the fact that Denise Levertov’s poetry frequently expressed an extraordinary interest in the subject of organic poetry. As a matter of fact, approximately all of her poetry can be classified as dealing with the organic poetry. In her essay “Some Notes on Organic Form” published in The Poet in the World,” Levertov explaines this theory:

> [A]n ‘inscape,’ or sequence of experiences that flow from one experience, is created within which tension, energy and balance are present and then a narrative voice is woven through and around the inscape. Instress is the experience the reader has when perceiving the poem or experiencing the inscape. (PW 78)

Such an organic form for Levertov depends upon the poet’s eye of “recognizing what we perceive, and is based upon 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” (79). In this sense, form is discoverable but does not mean formlessness like free verse; it means a concentration of energy. Hence, poetic form must correspond to the natural form, and language must be made through “seeing

into" experience.

Denise Levertov's interest in organic poetry is based upon social-cultural influences. Bathed in the culture and literature of the twentieth century, Levertov lived in an era saturated with New Critics writing. However, open form poetry was a typical subject chosen by the twentieth-century poets to fight against the New Critics writing. "Pound and Williams were the Modernist master invoked by the postwar poet involved in the insurrection against what was perceived as the Eliotic domination of the New Criticism" (Gelpi 2). At that time, Levertov faced a fierce challenge "to what she had learned and practiced, Levertov remade herself as a poet, starting with the basic structural elements—line, rhythm, diction, image" (Gelpi 2), as a poet of that time, Levertov was more or less affected by this specific atmosphere. She was related with the Beat movement and the Black Mountain School, so some critics categorized her as one of the members. However, she attempted to maintain her own identity and idea, which separated her poetry from that of the Black Mountain School. She never tied herself to any specific school though Beat and Black Mountain School indeed exerted some influence on her. Levertov shared the common influence of events and cultural development within contemporary literature.

Denise Levertov's organic poetry is a movement of apperception; that is, all senses need to be opened in order to feel, to touch, to see, to listen, and to read this outer world. In "Some Notes on Organic Form," Levertov expresses that "during writing a poem, the various elements of her being are in communion with one another and heightened" (NSE 76). She continues to explain that "ear and eye, intellect and passion interrelate more subtly than at other times," and she regards the poet's "checking for accuracy," for precision of language that must take place throughout the writing not as a "matter of one element supervising the others but of intuitive

interaction between all the elements involved" (76).

Levertov treated poem as an entity of organic form. Levertov said in an interview that "in poetry always concerns the movement of the mind as it thinks and feels, and does so in language" (Estess 161). She thought that "reading aloud" is a very important way of writing poem. Only through reading aloud, the poet can soon determine where needs line-breaks, so the poet should learn well how to control the breath. Levertov's parents read poems loudly to her since she was a child. She also read aloud to her son when he was little. Such practice helped her to have a strong voice. In addition, having good ears was also important to constitute a poem. Levertov emphasized:

> If a poet is deficient in this, he or she does not have a feeling for combining sounds well, noticing the quality of sounds insofar as they are smooth, rough, heavy, or light. These people tend to combine content and sound textures inappropriately. They will use really heavy, thick, dense, sticky sounds when they are dealing with material which is light, airy, or ethereal. (Estess 162)

She compared a good ear for poetry was like a good ear for music. If the poet owns a bad ear, he or she needs to listen enough to improve it. Besides, rhyme, chime, echo, and reiteration not only serve to knit the elements of an experience "but also as being the means, the sole means, by which the density of texture and returning or circling of perception can be transmuted into language, apperceived" ("Some Notes on Organic Form" 76). Such a technical mastery creates a poem with entity form.

Denise Levertov called her every poem an "act of faith" (New and Selected

Essays 249), in the sense that it is "a venture into the unknown," and in that the move from improvising on poetic themes and ideas to actual writing "resembles moving from intellectual assent to opening the acts of daily life to permeation by religious faith" (NSE 249). Denise Levertov's steps of creating were complex. She needed to pay close attention to explore the process of what she called "the boundary of art." For her, the boundary was an area, as Paul A, Lacey observes, "process and product interconnect, and where she typically locates the artist, the pilgrim, the wanderer, the mystic and the saint-all reflections of a single archetype, as the journey of art and the journey of faith" (151). This journey led her to the road of imagination "in the decisions of a day and in the word-by-word, line-by-line decision of a poem in the making" (NSE 248-49), and adventured into the mystic unknown. "In that complex process of imagination, apperception, thinking/feeling, feeling/thinking." As she described, the experience of writing the poem was like a "long swim through waters of unknown depth" (Ibid 249-50). From improvising on poetic themes and ideas to actual writing was the process of being permeated by religious faith. Then she was "through enacting in the poetry the contention of belief with disbelief" (Ibid 250), and went into Christian faith. Hence, she finally would find out the right words, the right image, and the right arrangement of the lines on the page. In her essay "Work That Enfaiths," (1990) she called this experience of writing the poem as "passages of Julian of Norwich and passages of the Gospel" which "brought [her] a little bit closer to faith" (NSE 253). Levertov thought that her process of making inspiration was like to dialogue with God; the poet needed to open the mind and then automatically came to in front of Christian faith. Denise Lervertov's father, Paul Levertoff, was a Hasidic believer, so this Hasidic legend instructed her to understand the importance of reciprocal relationship between the human and the divine. This Hasidic background

is obvious in her poetry.

In “Some Notes on Organic Form” (1965) Denise Levertov defines organic poetry as “a method of apperception, i.e., of recognizing what we perceive some experience felt intensely by the poet demands its equivalence in words” (NSE 67). For Levertov the process of seeking inspiration is like a journey of being anxious for God, so the beginning of reaching this demand is “to contemplate, to meditate, not simply to observe, to regard, but to do the things in the presence of a god”(NSE 67-8). In “Origins of a Poem” (1968) she compares to a poet as a priest, so writing a poem is like to converse with the God. The process is sequent; there is no break between seeing and saying as Lervertov herself reveals:

> The poet does not see and then begin to search for words to say what he sees: he begins to see and at once begins to say or to sing, and only in the action of verbalization does he see further. His language is not more dependent on his vision than his vision is upon his language. This is surely one of the primary distinctions between poet and mystic.
>
> (Poet in the World 73)

The process of the form is unique—elements of experience are different. Denise Levertov perceives that the relationships of objects are important; such an aspect originated from Ezra Pound’s Cubism whose mosaic theory combined essential elements so that the poet could get a new perspective on them. Moreover, an idea also from Pound is that “when you yourself move, the relationship of objects will change”; this result would cause the perceiver to look at things everywhere.

Such a theory drew many critics almost decades to think about her organic

form. Levertov's poems should be written in England, but she later came to be an American poet after she left for America. She became Williams's closest follower and her poem was truly made in American tradition. Denise Levertov's organic form could be regarded as an important movement in literature that flourished in the middle years of the twentieth-century. Organic poetry is benevolent and compassionate toward the individual, permitting a person to use it for his profit and instruction and allowing him to explore its internal meanings. From this perspective, organic poetry can be regarded as a great teacher and as a source of beauty and moral wisdom. Furthermore, the organic poetry stresses a mystic and harmonic vision of oneness--the reconciliation of man and the poem. As a result, Denise Levertov developed a unique form of lyrical poetry. With her great influence, she made her readers see not only her good skills but also her concerns with the great problems of humanity; therefore, the purpose of this thesis will reveal all of Levertov's unique lyrical poems.

This thesis attempts to offer an in-depth study of Denise Levertov's concepts of poetics. Poems from Levertov's books are studied in detail to offer a development, which shows how her poetry demonstrates the interaction between inside and outside and forms her inner and outer self. Hence, this thesis will consist of five parts—the self-being, gender, nature, politics, and religion; these five parts will give a clear introduction to Levertov's themes of personal relationship as well as the relationship of self to the poetry. Levertov showed her sensitive observation about self-being in her adolescence; she also made her readers consider what role her poetry plays with organic entity in poetic form; she had an understanding of life meanings, so she offered some considerable problems through self-being, gender, nature, politics, and religious viewpoints. Thus, this thesis will have an overall survey of Levertov's

poetic skills from young to old. I hope that this thesis way offer some contributions to readers to notice and appreciate Denise Levertov's poetry.

In addition, I want to investigate certain aspects of the traditional domestic manner of living in association with the female role as a wife in Levertov's organic poems. In the beginning chapter of my research, I reveal my survey motivation and the twentieth-century social-cultural context as a basic premise of the development of my whole thesis. The following chapters will focus on five main issues regarding Levertov's viewpoints and treatments of organic poetry: self-being, gender, nature, politics, and religious viewpoints. Besides, I also offer a general discussion on Levertov's family and educational backgrounds which affect her thoughts about organic poetry and a comparison of viewpoints upon man and organic poetry between the New Critics and Levertov.

Chapter Two

Self-being

After Denise Levertov came to America, her verses were associated with the Black Mountain School in terms of stylistics; however, she refused to be categoried in any faction. As she explained, "I cannot simply enter a ready-made structure; I have to find componets and construct my own" (NSE 239). Levertov definitely announced her self and tried to find out her own field:

> During my early years in America I was rather embarrassed by my first, English book; but later I came to accept it…as showing intuitive sign…of qualities that link it with what I tried to do as I grew more aware of craft and what must underlie it…the field has grown larger as I walked through it, one might say, but yes, it is the same field. (qtd. in Marten 26)

As a child, Denise Levertov never went to school to study with others. Her parents chose her and her older sister to be educated at home rather than in school. Her household was permeated with poetry, so she wrote poems from an early age. She alleged to decide to become a writer at the age of five. It is not difficult to imagine that she spent a lot of time reading poems, and had begun to learn how to "enjoy" being alone, as she was a little child. She was almost often alone—in a situation of "solitude." After she moved to America, her isolated condition did not improve. At times, she was usually anxious for her old British friends who had left her. After having marriage, a new relationship between her and her husband happened, and this wife-to-be needed to re-scrutinize her life and to define her

identity. Three years later, the two-people world was soon changed, a baby being born, so this mother, who before long became a wife from a young lady, built again her new identity to be a mother. When her child grew up, she faced a fact that her son left her and started his independent life. Her mother was ill at ninety-three. She took care of her dying mother, and she gradually understood her mother was lonesome. More than five decades of being a writer, she experienced many chances to think about her interaction with others. Levertov through her poems described the progress of the loss and search of self.

For a poet, setting the sense of self and concreting the self core, and then finding out the adequate distance between self and others became an ultimate aim of her endeavors in life. This chapter will strive to prove this long course of the poet's growth from a woman originally without a sense of self to the establishment of independent self-being, becoming a self-knowing individual, rather than someone's wife, mother, or daughter.

I. Husband-wife Poems

"Durgan" is a poem written in 1945 and was collected in The Double Image, her first volume of verse, reprinted in Collected Earlier Poem, 1940-1960. This poem was considered by Lervertov to be one of the most representative verses in her adolescence. The theme presents a kind of melancholy atmosphere because the speaker mourns for the loss of childhood. At last the speaker recognized and accepted the sense of loss:

At Durgan waves are black as cypresses,

clear as the water of a wishing well,

caressing the stones with smooth palms, looking
into the pools as enigmatic eyes
peer into mirrors, or music echoes
out of a wood the waking dreams of day,
blind eyelids lifting to a coloured world.

Now with averted head your living ghost
walks in my mind, your shadow leans
over the half-door of dream; your footprint lies
where gulls alight; shade of a shade, you laugh.
But separate, apart, you are alive:
You have not died, therefore I am alone.

Like birds, cottage white and grey
alert on rocks are gathered, or low
under breaches, dark but not desolate;
shells move sand, or seaweed gleams
with their clear yellow, as tides recede.
Serene in storm or eloquent in sunlight
sombre Durgan where no strangers come
awaits us always, but is always lost:
we are separate, sharing no secrets, each alone;
You will listen no more, now, to the sounding sea. (CEP 21)

As a poet, Levertov was always in her solitude to observe the world. Facing a fact

of losing her childhood, the poet was going to create a new course in the future and re-defined her self. The poet used well her eyes and ears to see and listen to this world around her, so readers can feel strong visual images and sounds in this poem. The mysterious tone is throughout the whole poem. As Audrey T. Rodgers says, "her penchant for biblical and mythic material both augurs her lifelong preoccupation with myth and fantasy and the mystical and provides her with a wealth of images to draw upon" (59). Levertov was within the Romantic tradition before she came to America. The structure of this poem is in enjambed lines, not break-lines.

In a 1946 poem "Interim," Levertov began to examine her self and tried to explore the outer world from her self. She avoided trapping herself into a solitsary state:

> Not more alone
> waking than sleeping, in darkness than in light,
> yet it is now we can assume
> an attitude more listening than longing,
> extend invisible antennae towards
> some intimation, echo, emanation
> falling slowly like a destined feather
> that lights at last before the feet
> of hesitating fear. Not less alone
> in city than in solitude, at least
> this time—an hour or minute?—left between
> dreaming and action, where the only glitter
> is the soft gleam of words, affording
> intimacy with each submerged regret,

awakes a new lucidity in pain,
so that with day we meet
familiar angels that were lately tears
and smile to know them only fears transformed. (CEP 4)

The act of "listening" is still central to the act of writing in this poem. The poem also touches on the similar theme of moving from solitude to transformation. Critics always express that the life of the poet should be in a state of solitude as the poet's process of creating. Critic Rilke's opinion gave Levertov a deep consideration about the relationships of self with others:

> I had learned as a child to enjoy being alone; now I saw how Rilke pointed to solitude as necessary for the poet's inner development, for that must be in order to experience all the multifold otherness of life. Later on, the phrase he used in relation to marriage or a comparable relationship, the mutual bordering and guarding of two solitudes; dimly understood at first, become a cardinal point in my map of love; and still later in my life I came to see solitude, and the individual development for which it is a condition, as the only valid ground on which communion of the many, the plural Other of brother-and sisterhood, can take place. (Zlotkowski 324)

Denise Levertov's volumes of poetry around 1960 centered on love for her husband, son, and mother. "The Marriage," collected in Here and Now, expresses that the speaker wants to probe for a solid interrelationship between herself and her husband, and the meaning of her marriage:

I want to speak to you.

To whom else should I speak?

It is you who make

a world to speak of.

In your warmth the

fruits ripen—all the

apples and pears that grow

on the south wall of my

head. If you listen

it rains for them, then

they drink. If you

speak in response

the seeds

jump into the ground.

Speak or be silent: your silence

Will speak to me. (CEP 47)

The speaker, “I,” being a wife, cannot conceal her desires for communicating with her husband by the repeated word “speak” to imply her motive. In this poem, readers may find out some symbols of mythology, which Levertov loved to adopt in her poem, such as fruits—apples and pears. The fruit appears as a symbol of abundance. Apples represent peace, and apple blossoms are a symbol of women's physical beauty; besides, in Greek and Roman mythology, pears are sacred to three the goddesses: Hera, Aphrodite and Pomona, so they symbolize the spiritual.

II. Mother-son Poems

'Who He Was" reprinted in Collected Earlier Poems 1940-1960, is the first poem written about her son:

> Who is it will come out of the dark,
> whose cries demand our mercy, tyrant
> no longer, but alone still, in a solitude
> memory cannot reach? (CEP 11)

Readers know that "He" in "Who He Was" is her son. The poet described her unborn fetus still in her body was going out from her womb. After her son was born, she and her son would become two individuals, not a whole. Even though the "tyrant," who always ordered people to show regards, came to her life and sacrificed her most of the time to take care of him, it was necessary to consolidate her identity for herself. However, a mother with love toward her son is an unalterable principle, so she made a wish for her unborn baby: "Love can never/ Wish a life no darkness; but man love/ Be constant in the life our love has made" (CEP 11).

"The Son" can be regarded as the sequel of "Who He Was" and which attempts to offer an answer to the poem "Who He Was." The first part of the poem titled "The Disclosure," which is part one of "The Son," describes that the fetus gradually becomes a grown-up and is about to be in his adolescence, and then soon he will enter his mature adulthood:

> He-who-came-forth was
> It turned out

A man—

Who,

Conceived in joy, in joy,

Lies nine months alone in a walled silence?” (CEP 11)

As a mother, facing the child growing to maturity, her mind intermingles with sorrow and joy. The mixed feelings are presented in the poem. Almost each sentence breaks into several lines, so readers seem to be able to feel a mother’s breath, from inhaling to exhaling. The poet tries to deliver her complicated emotions to her son by the device of break-lines to present. The mother witnesses her child’s progress of growing-up from a boy to a man. Her son is an independent being not depending upon her:

Moves among us from room to room of our life

In boots, in jeans, in a cloak of flame

pulled out of his pocket along with

old candywrappers, where it had lain

transferred from pants to pants,

folded small as a curl of dust,

from the beginning— (CEP 12)

The second part of “The Son,” titled “The Woodblock,” describes the speaker’s son is old enough to be able to make a wood-block by his own self-portrait. The speaker, the mother, sees her growing child with a joyful emotion; therefore, an irreconcilable conflict is produced in the mother’s mind: intermingled between

sorrow and joy, the same theme as “The Disclosure.” The metaphor of the wood-block self-portrait presents the relationship with the boy and the concept of the boy’s identity. The boy is making “his visioned / own face…/ His own face/ drawn from the wood.” The boy is brought up by degrees and is well qualified for this work; he is forming his self-being and building his individual identity. However, the mother finds out an independent child is easy to forget the root of his life. In the poem, the words “rapt” and “imperious” represent a mother’s thoughts of worry; she seems to perceive her child’s differences. When the child like “a small brook” comes to the secular world, he becomes “seagoing river,” possibly would never return to his origin: “Deep in the manhood his childhood/ so swiftly led to, a small brook rock-leaping/ into the rapt, imperious, seagoing river” (Poems 60-67 168). Oftentimes as a mother, she will get caught up with the role as “mother,” and usually forget to nourish herself as individual. Especially, when the child becomes an adult, who has his own identity, the conflict in her mind appears. She, on the one hand, expects her son to be a well-grown man; on the other side, when she sees the child starts developing his own life, she is at a loss.

The character of the “organic form” is described by as James F. Mersmann: “Levertov’s poetry is a poetry of the eye in that it is concerned with seeing into experience and discovering the order and significance that her poet’s faith tells her is really there behind the surface chaos” (Web 1974). Levertov’s poems focused on the “seeing into” experience with an organic and developing vision, and then the final inscape becomes the words of the poem. Levertov’s husband-wife and mother-son poems center on her private experiences. She reveals the unfirm relationship with her husband and son; even these two most intimate persons are at the end cannot be depended upon. She is aware of the importance of searching for self. Through her

eye, she discoveres “the order and significance”—her awareness, behind the surface chaos—two unfirm relationships.

III. Mother-daughter Poems

Many poems in Life in the Forest mainly describe the life and grief of her dying mother. Her words of the book Harry Marten points out, “touchstones for the thoughts and emotions of the wide variety of narrative and reflective verse, are the deeply moving group of poems remembering the life and grieving the death of the poet’s mother” (151). Her mother died “at home, yet far away from home, / thousands of miles of earth and sea, and ninety years/ from her roots” (“A Daughter I” 26). Here Levertov sees her old mother memorizing her childhood; the mother used to be “consoling, judging, forgiving, /whose arms were once/ strong to hold her and rock her, / who used to chant/ a ritual song that did magic/ to take away hurt, but “now mother is child, helpless,” she observes:

> … at the mercy
> of looming figures who have the power
> to move her, feed her, wash her, leave or stay
> at will. And the daughter feels, with horror,
> metamorphosed: she’s such a looming figure—huge—a
> tower
> of iron and ice… (27)

Because her mother was very ill, she was unable to say “love/ shrunken in her to a cube of pain/ locked in her throat” (27). At that time, she suddenly knew her

mother's solitude and her own. She begins to speculate her mother's whole life through her power of imagination:

> … her mother at six years old in the riverfield,
> twelve years old in her orphan's mourning,
> twenty, forty, eighty—the storied screen unfolding,
> told and told—and the days untold. A life!
> A life—ninety-three years unique in the aeons. (27-28)

In "A Daughter II," Levertov vividly pictures the scenes during the last week of her dying. The fragmental sentence in this poem seems to force the reader to feel her short and rapid breaths because of suffering from her mother's sickness:

> A day later begins
> the witnessing. A last week of the dying.
> when she inserts
> quivering spoonfuls of violently
> green or red gelatina
> into the poor obedient mouth,
> she knows it's futile…
>
> ("A Daughter II" 29)

At last, her mother was unable to resist her illness and then died. Her mother's body was uncomfortable:

> She did not die but lies half-speechless, incontinent,

aching in body, wandering in mind

in a hospital room.

a plastic tube, taped to her nose,

disappears into one nostril.

plastic tubes are attached to veins in her arms.

her urine runs through a tube into a bottle under the bed.

on her back and ankles are black sores.

The black sores are parts of her that have died.

("Death Psalm: O Lord of Mysteries" 39-40)

Whether writing husband-wife, mother-son, or mother-daughter poems, Levertov offers her personal wonderful experiences. As Harry Marten says, "her very re-creation of the experience sustains that vividness, reaching not only into the poet's life, but the reader's" (156-57). Moreover, Denise Levertov demonstrates interpersonal limitation to define her identity, an independent female, not somebody's wife, mother or daughter.

Chapter Three

Gender

Critic Muriel Rukeyser once remarked that poetry "is an art…expressing and evoking the moving relation between the individual consciousness and the world" (qtd. in Marten 27). Levertov as a poet records her actual experience in order to "discover and explore what it means to be an individual and what it means to live in the world" (Marten 70). Levertov herself has said, "The essence of poetry, like the essence of life, is paradox. And paradox does run through her descriptions of man" (qtd. in Wagner 48). She believes that men are able to do their best to live to feel, to see everything around them, so the major theme of her poetry is the progress of a human being, especially, the poet's own' progress becomes the one of the most frequent, noticeable subject.

I. Early Poems of Awareness

"Gypsy's Window" in Here and Now published 1957 is a good example of showing her sensitive and writing power to be capable of becoming a female poet in her maturity and in her love:

> It seems a stage
> backed by imaginations of velvet,
> cotton, satin, loops and stripes—
>
> A lovely unconcern
> scattered the trivial plates, the rosaries

and centered

a narrownecked dark vase,

unopened yellow and pink

paper roses, a luxury of open red

paper roses—

Watching the trucks go by, from stiff chairs

behind the window show, an old

bandanna'd brutal dignified

woman, a young beautiful woman

her mouth a huge contemptuous rose—

The courage

of natural rhetoric tosses to dusty

Hudson St. the chance of poetry, a chance

poetry gives passion to the roses,

the roses in the gypsy's window in a blue

vase, look real, as unreal

as real roses. (CEP 96)

"Gypsy" usually associates with "female" her mysterious, magic power can hypnotize hapless man who is ensared before he knows what hits him. All men are victims underneath her spells. Levertov implies that her ability is equal to men, even higher. As Wagner says, "self-consciousness has given way to a healthily aggressive pride in self" (56). "Gypsy woman" is also a symbol of the nomadic lifestyle of a touring

woman. "stiff" and "nomadic" have exactly opposite meanings. The spearker, a woman poet, originally sits on the "stiff" chair to thirst for inspiration; however, after the conceives herself as a Gypsy woman with magic power to create her unrestrained imagination, "a paper rose" suddenly becomes "a real rose."

"September 1961" mainly mourns her mentors, Ezra Pond, William Carlos Williams, and H.D., whose lives arrived at the end. Levertove, on the one hand, shows her regards for them, but on the other hand, considers herself, the female, as a member of their succeeding poets. Levertov here strongly expresses, as Wagner says, her "wistful assurance" (56). She is eager for her identity as a poet or a female poet to be able to get recognition from the public:

> But for us the road
> unfurls itself, we count the
> words in our pockets, we wonder
>
> how it will be without them, we don't
> stop walking, we know
> there is far to go, sometimes
>
> we think the night wind carries
> a smell of the sea… (TS 10-11)

Levertov's early poems announce her personal fulfillment to be "a becoming aware" for attaining an autonomous self. She insists that the poet should entirely dedicate her personal experience to quest for ideal identity. Wagner comments that "this

belief not only includes the premise that experience is the source of art/life, but also widens that earlier rational" (57). Her poems usually speak about herself as persona.

II. Middle Stage of Dilemma

For Levertov, a poet should bear an open mind to examine the relationship with others, and "marriage life," in general, is considered a very good chance for man and woman to establish the relationship and to define each other. However, after getting married, Levertov, like other common women, sometimes is entraped in the traditional role as a wife whose usual time is limited by daily chore for family. Her poems begin to turn away the focus from the poet herself to others including men, the multitude, and the world. "Three Mediations," written in 1960, adopts an attitude of debasing self—the poet herself becomes "an objective correlative rather than as a person in her own right" (Wagner 58):

Barbarians
throng the straight roads of
my empire, converging
on black Rome.
There is darkness in me.
Silver sunrays
sternly, in tenuous joy
cut through its folds:
mountains
arise from cloud.
Who was it yelled, cracking

the glass of delight?

Who sent the child

sobbing to bed, and woke it

later to comfort it?

I, I, I, I.

I multitude, I tyrant,

I angel, I you, you

world, battlefield, stirring

with unheard litanies, sounds of piercing

green half-smothered by

strewn bones. (Poems 60-67 31)

Another honest description about the role as a woman can be represented by a poem entitled "The Wife," collected in With Eyes at the Back of Our Head in 1959. It is so ironic that the wife is not a human being any more but a "frog" or a "dog":

A frog under you,

knees drawn up ready to leap out of time.

a dog beside you,

snuffing at you, seeking

scent of you… (WE 114)

Later in "The Dogwood" in her third book Overland to the Islands, Levertov again could not resolve such a situation in which she has to choose between serving a

traditional woman's role and pursuing an independent self:

The sink is full of dishes. Oh well.
Ten o'clock, there's no
hot water.
The kitchen floor is unswept, the broom
has been shedding straws. Oh. well.

The cat is sleeping, Nikolai is sleeping,
Mitch is sleeping, early to bed,
aspirin for a cold. Oh well.

No school tomorrow, someone for lunch,
4 dollars left from the 10 — how did that go?
Mostly on food. Oh well.

I could decide
to hear some chamber music
and today I saw — what?
Well, some huge soft deep
blackly gazing purple
and red (and pale)
anemones. Does that
take my mind off the dishes?
And dogwood besides.

Oh well. Early to bed, and I'll get up

early and put

a shine on everything and write

a letter to Duncan later that will shine too

with moonshine. Can I make it? Oh well. (CEP 59)

The poet here offers some visual images. The extraordinary overload of daily chores impresses the readers. The poet is responsible for everything in her family, and her husband is as infantilized here as her son; she cannot get any help from him. "A dogwood," a kind of plant, symbolizes crucifixion of Christ by Christian religion; "anemone," also a kind of plant, is a symbol of desolation. These two kinds of plants imply the exhaustion of mind and energy. The last line "a letter to Duncan" expresses the poet's another emotion toward becoming self-reliant. Besides, the repeated "Oh well" reveals her powelessness; as Ron Silliman remarks, "its recurrent tone might as well be a gong of depression: Oh Well. The implicit anger —— never comes through;" the sound of "Oh Well" is like a gong reminding of her depression.

III. Later Period of Equilibrium

Denise Levertov took more than ten years to resolve the dilemma of gender playing. In 1947, she married Mitchell Goodman, an American writer, and a year later they moved to America. They settled in New York City, spending summers in Maine. Their son Nickolai was born in 1949. She became a naturalized U. S. citizen in 1956. However, their marriage ended in 1974. Even though she could not continue to keep her marriage life, she still persisted in an "articulation of joy—joy in self, delight in life, sheer pleasure in pure being," remarked by Albert

Gelpi (201). A twenty-seven-year marriage nourisheed her maturity toward a full female individual.

"The Woman" in The Freeing of the Dust, printed in 1975, put at the beginning of the collection of divorce poems, is a poem with ironic tone. The poet here is unsatisfied with her bridegroom, and also delivers the depression about her broken marriage:

It is the one in homespun
you hunger for
when you are lonesome;

the one in crazy feathers
dragging opal chains in dust
wearies you
…
it is solitude
moving through multitude on the night streets.
But the one in homespun
whom you want is weary
too, wants to sit down
beside you neither silent
nor singing, in quietness. Alas,
they are not two but one.
…
can you endure

life with two brides, bridegroom? (FD 53)

The poet satirizes that her husband does surely not want an artist wife with imaginative power; he desires for not only an obedient wife but also sitting down beside him "neither silent nor singing, in quietness." However, the poet herself also concedes the problem that a woman always splits self for her bridegroom. The role of a woman is imposed by the paternal society to become a docile wife, but a poet's inner mind is contradictory to her husband's expectation. She is doomed to be solitude "moving through multitude," but she is still very "adamant about this complex psychic reality" and sighs—"Alas, / they are not two but one."
At the end of this poem, the poet shows her hypocrisy and asks in reply—"Can you endure/ life with two brides, Bridegroom" (Gelpi 299)?

"The Way It Is" in The Freeing of the Dust, describes that Levertov enjoys her independence and thus could live more zestfully:

More real than ever, as I move
in the world, and never out of it,
Solitude.
…

Like a mollusk's, my hermitage
is built of my own cells.
Burned faces, stretched horribly,

eyes and mouths forever open,

weight the papers down on my desk.
No day for years I have not thought of them.

And more true than ever the familiar image
placing love on a border
where, solitary, it paces, exchanging
across the line a deep attentive gaze,
with another solitude pacing there.

Yet almost no day, too, with no
happiness, no
exaltation of larks uprising from the heart's
peat-bog darkness. (FD 47)

In the beginning, Levertov expresses the central idea of this poem that the persona, the poet herself, lives in the secular world; meanwhile, she also secures her "solitude." In the last stanza, the poet finds the joyfulness, although the pain is still there. That is, she achieves the harmony between external events and her inner state.

"A Woman Alone," Composed four years after Levertov's divorce, collected in Life in the Forest, delivers the message of the great pleasure in "blessed Solitude." Although such a blessed reward seems not sure for an aging and divorced woman, she loves its "sober euphoria." She could sleep alone among books. Now she is a woman really enjoying the freedom of divorced life:

When she can sit or walk for hours after a movie
talking earnestly and with bursts of laughter
with friends, without worrying
that it's late, dinner at midnight, her time
spent without counting the change . . .
When half her bed is covered with books
and no one is kept awake by the reading light
and she disconnects the phone, to sleep till noon . . .
…
She feels
so much younger and more beautiful
than the looks. At her happiest
—or even in the midst of
some less than joyful hour, sweating
patiently through a heatwave in the city
or hearing the sparrows at daybreak, dully gray,
toneless, the sound of fatigue—
a kind of sober euphoria makes her believe
in her future as an old woman, a wanderer
seamed and brown,
little luxuries of the middle of life all gone,
watching cities and rivers, people and mountains,
without being watched; not grim nor sad,
an old winedrinking woman, who knows
the old roads, grass-grown, and laughs to herself . . .

…

Now at least

she is past the time of mourning,

now she can say without shame or deceit,

O blessed Solitude. (LF 16)

Many of Denise Levertov's poems depict the detailed record of her experience; especially, she often remarks about the "split self" among her peers who have similar problem defining self because of gender, such as Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton. Such a "split self" eventually ruin their marriages; some of them have to spend time in a mental hospital. Although Leveretov has defined her identity, she tries to achieve a kind of "equilibrium" with others; she never thinks that the poets need to submerge themselves in individual ego. As critic Albert Gelpi says, "[Levertov] is not an aggressively feminist poet, she is very much a woman poet, or perhaps, more accurately, a poet conscious that the materiality of her life as a woman is not matter to be transcended" (Gelpi 202).

Chapter Four

Nature

Denise Levertov's poetry about many topics—social, gender, political, religious, and nature in particular. In the last few decades of the twentieth century, it is obvious to all thinking people that this beautiful land has suffered from damage. We humankind as a part of nature are actually an arch-criminal of ruining the physical Earth. Levertov, a poet, is able to see into experience with a vision, so she not only writes poems praising the beautiful nature, but also expressing nature's anguish. However, Levertov's confidence in her own artistic ability would allow her, as Jim Schley say, "not to despair at the distance between word and world, but instead uses every resource at hand so as to completely inhabit the interval itself" (Web 1998).

I. The Early Nature Poems

Denise Levertov's early poems, up to 1965, are rather close to the characteristic of the traditional Romanticism, which means "truth to the emotions, or sentiment, a strong belief in the individual self, and the conviction that poetry deals in some sense with truth" (Rodgers 57). As Coleridge once said, "the Romantic poetry is the "union of deep feeling and profound thought; the fine balance of truth in observing, with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed…" (qtd. in Rodgers 57). That is, the Romantic poets must always perceive the visual things of the world they live. Thus, in this phase of Levertov's writing career, "Nature" also becomes essential in her important poetic themes. Nature is regarded as a setting for reflecting the outer events of this world according to her inner experience, so Nature is "for her musings on her experience, especially when she measures the

impermanence of man against the permanence of nature" (Rodgers 59). Besides, Levertov devotes her poems to a great number of oppositions such as darkness and light, youth and maturity, land and sea, gain and loss, sound and silence. Color is also fundamental in her poems. "I" in the poem would make readers aware of the speaker who usually observes the world around her.

"The Dead Butterfly" collected in With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads describes a butterfly's death due to Nature's destruction by human beings. The first person narrative "I" is pronounced the same as"eye" to emphasize the visible to the poet and to be willing to explore:

I.

Now I see its whiteness
is not white but green, traced with green,
and resemble of the stones
of which the city is built,
quarried high in the mountains.

II.

Everywhere among the marigolds
the rainblown roses and the hedges
of tamarisk are white
butterflies this morning, in constant
tremulous movement, only those
that lie dead revealing
their rockgreen color and the bold

cut of the wings. (WE 88-9)

First of at all, the pattern of repeated single word called “echo word,” which Levertov herself recognizes as: “I particularly like the way repeated words weave strongly into the fabric, and the sense of word leading to echo word, not capriciously, but in a revelation of correspondences” (qtd. in Wagner 88). In this poem, the repetition of “white” as an echo word begins in the first two lines and leads to another “white” in the second stanza; the same way is used in “green.” The color “white” symbolizes the purity of the beautiful nature without being damaged. Other words related to nature are “marigold,” “stones,” “tamarisk,” and “mountain.” “City” and “quarried” represent the opposite of nature; the use of numbers at the beginning of these two stanzas symbolizes a man-made technology. A man-made city and quarry suggest that the butterfly will be killed. “Rainblown roses” and “constant tremulous movement” give an image of death. A butterfly, both beautiful and frail, is associated with the opposition of light and darkness. “White” and “green” represent life and death; a living butterfly is “white” but when dead becomes “rockgreen.” The poet offers a perfect balance of opposition and juxtaposition as Ivor Griffiths comments in “Denise Levertov the Dead Butterfly”:

> The contrast of colours, life and death, movement and stillness create a tension and conflict within the poem that is constrained by the subtle use of numbers and the implication that science, symbolized by the order intrinsic to numbering, is attempting to stifle the wonder, energy and freedom of nature. Levertov shows the delicate state of balance the world is through the metaphor of a butterfly. (Web 2007)

II. The Praise Poems

Before Levertov moved to Seattle, she had lived in many places, such as England, New York and Mexico; however, she died of lymphoma on December 20, 1997 in Seattle, where she had lived for over two decades. At her old age, she became a skilled teacher of poetry and taught at Stanford University and the University of Washington. Her book, Evening Train, records her specific observation on Mount Rainier near Seattle's Lake Washington through her window. In this phase of her poetic career, she puts her creative energy on spirituality. The theme of her poetry begins to turn to Nature. She considers that the places where the poet had dwelt would influence her inspiration; in particular, in the natural places she loved so much. Levetov describes in her essay "Some Affinities of Content" that "poets who live near wilderness or, at least, near landscape with no obvious hand-of-man on it, may have a closer connection to things spiritual than have poets whose images come from paved, logged, or long-farmed regions" (New and Selected Essays 2).

"Settling," the first poem of Evening Train (1992), shows the poet's artistry and intelligence:

> I was welcomed here—clear gold
> of late summer, of opening autumn,
> the dawn eagle sunning himself on the highest tree,
> the mountain revealing herself unclouded, her snow
> tinted apricot as she looked west,
> tolerant, in her steadfastness, of the restless sun
> forever rising and setting.

Now I am given

a taste of the grey foretold by all and sundry,

a grey both heavy and chill. I've boasted I would not care,

I'm London-born. And I won't. I'll dig in,

into my days, having come here to live, not to visit.

Grey is the price

of neighboring with eagles, of knowing

a mountain's vast presence, seen or unseen. (ET 3)

The color of the earth is possible to become grey or gold due to seasonal changes. When viewing the seasonal changes of Mount Rainier, the poet-speaker understands the Nature's principle. Through such a realizing, she knows that people should keep the balance of life between gains and losses. Besides, Levertov frames herself in the poem: "Now I am given/ a taste of the grey foretold by all and sundry." The poet-speaker now wants to taste the "grey," which presents "heavy and chill," but it is the price of having lived a whole life and the price of getting to choose the "seen or unseen" of the mountain's vast presence.

"Elusive," a poem praising Nature, collected in Evening Train, emphasizes Mount Rainier's mystery and its vast power:

The mountain comes and goes

on the horizon,

a rhythm elusive as that of a sea-wave

higher than all the rest, riding to shore

flying its silver banners— (ET 4)

"Open Secret," another poem in Evening Train, expresses the poet's reverence for Mount Rainier by witnessing its beauty at a distance not by mounting to touch. At the end, the poet evokes the power of the mountain as metaphor for her aspiration:

> Perhaps one day I shall let myself
> approach the mountain—
> …
> Perhaps not. I have no longing to do so.
> I have visited other mountain heights.
> This one is not, I think, to be known
> by close scrutiny, by touch of foot or hand
> or entire outstretched body; not by any
> familiarity of behavior, any acquaintance
> with its geology or the scarring roads
> humans have carved in its flanks.
> This mountain's power
> lies in the open secret of its remote
> apparition, silvery low-relief
> coming and going moonlike at the horizon,
> always loftier, lonelier, than I ever remember. (ET 14)

"Open Secret" is also a poem of praising Nature's power. For Levertov "praising" does not equal to hiding the negatives. She argues in "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival: "a poetry of praise is equally necessary, that we not be overcome by despair but have the

constant incentive of envisioned positive possibility — and because praise is an irresistible impulse of the soul" (NSE 143). However, a poet must, as Emily Archer says, "impart hope as well as articulate dread" like a prophet (Web 2009).

III. The Lament Poems

Levertov's poetic journey could be described as on a rugged road to walk; her latest poems especially show her distress about the role of a poet when she is always haunted by the sense of the death of the land. For her, a poet's task should be "to say or sing all that he or she can, to deal with as much of the world as becomes possible to him or her in language" (qtd. in Archer). She believes she and her poetry would reach the perfect balance not only in praising but also in lamenting nature.

"Urgent Whisper" from Breathing the Water, describes the poet-speaker's protest against nuclear testing. Levertov's use of personification gives the Earth a voice to play like a patient, a mother dying of pneumonia. "It comes from the Earth herself, I tell you, / Earth herself. I whisper/ because I'm ashamed. Isn't the earth our mother?" (BW 38) When the violence was toward a mother, the poet herself expressed "a silent delicate trembling" and "urgent whisper." Levertov's love for Nature was transferred from the love for her mother. Besides, by the repetitions of "beneath me, / beneath this house, beneath/ the road and the trees," the poet reinforces the image of violence toward Nature:

> It could be the rale of Earth's tight chest,
> her lungs scarred from old fevers, and she asleep-
>
> but there's no news from the seismographs,

the crystal pendant

hangs plumb from its hook;

and yet at times (and I whisper because

it's a fearful thing I tell you)

a subtle shudder has passed

from outside me into my bones,

up from the ground beneath me,

beneath this house, beneath

the road and the trees:

a silent delicate trembling no one has spoken of,

as if a beaten child or a captive animal

lay waiting the next blow.

It comes from the Earth herself, I tell you,

Earth herself. I whisper

because I'm ashamed. Isn't the earth our mother?

Isn't it we who've brought

this terror upon her? (BW 38)

Both poems of praise and lament indicate the realtionship with nature, so for Denise Levertov, a poet, "although often impelled . . . to write poems of pure celebration, is driven inevitably to lament, to anger, and to expression of dread"

because:

> although we humans are a part of nature ourselves, we have become . . . an increasingly destructive element within it, shaking and breaking the ‘great web’ — perhaps irremediably….those in which celebration and the fear of loss are necessarily conjoined…believe this flux and reflux echo what readers also feel in their response to ‘the green world.”
>
> (Forward LU)

Lervertov strives to grasp the realness of the natural world to remind humankind of a potential crisis that this beautiful earth will be destroyed one day if humankind continues to abuse it.

Chapter Five

Politics

An article entitled “Denise Levertov, Poet and Political Activist, Dies at 74,” published on Tuesday, December 23, 1997, was written by Mel Gussow in New York Times. Poet Robert Creeley said when interviewed by Mel Gussow:

> She was a constantly defining presence in the world we shared, a remarkable and transforming poet for all of us. She always had a vivid emotional response and also a completely dedicated sense of political and social need. (Web 1997)

Levetov’s dual role as poet and political activist became her annotation of identity. It could not be denied that Levetov lived through many wars in her whole life, so her poems consciously or unconsciously reflected war. For her, a poet’s task was to do what history asked of him or her at the right moment. Hence, when Vietnam War was underway, she assisted in founding a group called the Writers' and Artists' Protest against the War in Vietnam; she was also actively involved in the anti-nuclear movement; in 1967 she edited a volume of poetry for the War Resisters League. In her mid-sixties, political topics began to appear in many of her poems. In addition to the concern of the chaos of the earth and of all life upon it, Levertov also include political themes in her poems. She was not willing to be a smug but chose to live a public and political life.

I. The Poems during the Second World War

Denise Levertov's first poem, "Listening to Distant Gun," was written in 1940 when she was seventeen years old. During that period, she joined the Civil Nursing Reserve Program, and then she was sent to in a little town in Essex, where she listened to the distant guns. A sense of horror was evoked:

> The roses tremble; oh the sunflower's eye
> Is opened wide in sad expectancy.
> Westward and back the circling swallows fly,
> The rooks' battalions dwindle near the hill.
>
> That low pulsation in the east is war:
> No bell now breaks the evening's silent dream.
> The bloodless clarity of the evening's sky
> Betrays no whisper of the battle-scream. (CEP 3)

Traditional Romanticism that abounded in emotions and techniques influenced Levertov's early poems at that time. Levertov used the personification of nature to offer a sentimental atmosphere to enhance visual images, and juxtaposed these images, which were trembling roses, the open-eyed sunflowers, the circling swallow, and battalion, to produce the tension. The arrangement of the final two lines "The bloodless clarity of the evening's sky/ Betrays no whisper of the battle-scream" also successfully presents visual and aural images, and also hints of the coming of a horror war.

"Christmas, 1944," written between 1944 and 1946, collected in The Double Image, discusses about the war, and mainly satirizes Christmas's peacelessness.

There are a lot of images about death and sadness: “The wind has no tales to tell of sea and city, /a plague on many houses, fear knocking on the doors; / how venom trickles from the open mouth of death/ and trees are white with rage of alien battles.” The tone of despair was reinforced by images of darkness and death. However, many people died because of the inexorable war:

> Bright cards above the fire being no friends near,
> fire cannot keep the cold from seeping in.
> Spindrift sparkle and candles on the tree
> make brave pretence of light; but look out of doors:
> Evening already surrounds the curtained house,
> draws near, watches;
> gardens are blue with frost, and every carol
> bears a burden of exile, a song of slaves.
> Come in, then, poverty, and come in, death:
> this year too many lie cold, or die in cold
> for any small room’s warmth to keep you out.
> You sit in empty chairs, gleam in unseeing eyes;
> having no home now, you cast your shadow
> over the atlas, and rest in the restlessness
> of our long nights as we lie, dreaming of Europe. (CEP 24)

Throughout the poem, the poet makes visual images. A beam of “brave pretence of light”; “every carol bears a burden of exile, a song of slaves;” “poverty, and death in cold” draw out sorrowful images, but the hope of “dreaming of Europe”

balances the above opposed images. Levertov is good at using the juxtaposition of the opposition between hope and sorrow throughout the poem to reach a perfect balance. The poem at last conveys "the voice of love" to fight against the fear in the mind:

Though we are safe
In a flickering circle of winter festival
We dare not laugh; or if we laugh, we lie,
Hearing hatred crackle in the coal,
The voice of treason, the voice of love (CEP 25)

"Love" becomes a metaphor of peace while the war always causes darkness, plague, and death.

During the time of World War Two, people really lived the worst life, so when the war ended in 1946, Denise Levertov's poems turned to "peace." "A Dream of Cornwall" reflects Levettov's anxiety for a state of freedom alter the war:

Footprint of fury quiet, now, on the salt sand
hills couched like hares in blue grass of the air
water lifting its glass to star and candle
time curled at rest in a ready hand.

Now claw of wind plucking the string of the sea
never a bought bent no sad fruit falling;
never rage of autumn angry angel

but sails in to the haven of a tree.

O fear dissolves hear and now I cease
to hear the hammer the axe the bone the bell,
shade of a shade grown still, grief of a grief
lulled in green hollows of a well of peace. (CEP 5)

During World War Two, she really experienced the suffering: she saw the broken bodies and wreckages of buildings everywhere. She knew all scenes would deeply affect her. Everything happened exactly as expected. After Levertov went to America in 1948, she gradually cared about other political and social issues. By 1964-1965 the Vietnam War proceeded, she began to be very much involved in anti-war movement. Her political concern reached a climax during the Vietnam War.

II. The Poems during the Vietnam War

Denise Levertov is a poet of intense emotion and fervid political conviction. During the Vietnam War, Levertov and her husband Mitchell Goodman frequently discussed the political issue, so her works at that time began to shift to writing Vietnam poems instead of the passionate Nature poems. Her original intention of writing anti-war poems was against American troop to fight in Vietnam. Vietnam is in the Southeast of Asia. Both north and south of this country were badly damaged by the war. During the war, America not only stated a position of supporting the South Vietnam, but also sent half a million soldiers to attack the North Vietnam which was governed by Communism. This war was bloody and horrible, so for Denise

Levertov, a poet as a reporter should be at the front of the battle zone. Actually, she was not simply a reporter; she felt herself, as Patricia Hampl says, "implicated in the worst this country and this age has dropped down upon itself and upon the unprotected of the world" ("A Witness of Our Time" 167). She asked of her works to be:

> Writing more and more poems of grief, of rage, concerning the despoilment of the earth and of all life upon it, of the systematic destruction of all that we feel passionate love for, both by the greed of industry and by the mass murder we call war." (PW 123)

Such a strong political feeling mirroring in the poems let her lose some followers because they always had a question about whether the political theme could be considered poetics or not. However, Denise herself firmly believed that poetry creates "autonomous existence out of words and silenced by finding the organic form which reveals the inner meaning of experience. Poetry aspires to the autonomy of Song, but its musicality arises from fidelity to experience. The fully realized poem is a world in itself" (Lacey, 151). Levertov in "On the Edge of Darkness: What is Political Poetry?" remarkes:

> [I]t is ostensibly lyric…markedly, candidly, speaking in the poet's unmediated character…written from a personal rather than a fictive, and a subjective rather than objective, standpoint…The poetry of political anguish is at its best both didactic and lyrical. (LC 119)

She continued to explain the definition, "to affect our sense and engage our aesthetic response" (LC 119-20). Lorrie Smith comments that Levertov's political poetry as "initially shaken by the demands of radical activism, she is faced with the need to speak didactically without sacrificing her earlier lyricism" (qtd. in Griffiths). The Sorrow Dance is her first volume of poetry of political anguish.

Her poems about the war started from The Sorrow Dance. For her, the visionary eyes to "see into" the experience was important in writing poetry, but the war was far away; she could not use her poetic eyes to get first-hand message, so she learned of the disasters of war only through the television and the pictures of newspapers. Although Levertov's political poetry is written through others' eyes and received the experience from the public; she was still able to use the poet's eyes, as Mersmann discussed, "[to] see into experience and discover the order and significance from the surface chaos" (Web 1974). "Life at War," Levertov's best-known Vietnam poem, collected in The Sorrow Dance, shows that Denise Levertov attempted to use imagery to display the disturbing violence of the Vietnam War:

The disasters numb within us
caught in the chest, rolling
in the brain like pebbles. The feeling
resembles lumps of raw dough

weighing down a child's stomach on baking day.
Or Rilke said it, 'My heart. . .
Could I say of it, it overflows
with bitterness . . . but no, as though

its contents were simply balled into

formless lumps, thus

do I carry it about.'

The same war

continues.

We have breathed the grits of it in, all our lives,

our lungs are pocked with it,

the mucous membrane of our dreams

coated with it, the imagination

filmed over with the gray filth of it:

the knowledge that humankind,

delicate Man, whose flesh

responds to a caress, whose eyes

are flowers that perceive the stars,

whose music excels the music of birds,

whose laughter matches the laughter of dogs,

whose understanding manifests designs

fairer than the spider's most intricate web,

still turns without surprise, with mere regret
to the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk
runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies,
transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp-fragments,
implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gulleys.

We are the humans, men who can make;
whose language imagines *mercy*,
lovingkindness we have believed one another
mirrored forms of a God we felt as good—

who do these acts, who convince ourselves
it is necessary; these acts are done
to our own flesh; burned human flesh
is smelling in Vietnam as I write.

Yes, this is the knowledge that jostles for space
in our bodies along with all we
go on knowing of joy, of love;

our nerve filaments twitch with its presence
day and night,
nothing we say has not the husky phlegm of it in the saying,
nothing we do has the quickness, the sureness,

the deep intelligence living at peace would have.

(Poems 60-67 229)

Levertov uses the fragments, break-lines to reinforce the chaos of war, and chooses the patterned meter s to reflect order of civilized life: “whose music excels the music of birds, / whose laughter matches the laughter of dogs, / whose understanding manifests designs/ fairer than the spider’s most intricate web.” The tone here shifts from horror to hope as well. In the poem, Levertov condemns violence and savagery, and tries to bring “hope” to balance “anguish.” Such devices of opposition produced the tension and also balanced the contrast. Levertov in the end of the poem never let us forget a warning, as Audrey T. Rodgers says, “the waste—not only of human life—but the wasting of nature in the destruction of a once-beautiful land” (88). Levertov juxtaposes the beauty of language and the ugliness of human horror in the poem to reach a balance, so she has accomplished the revolution of what she called the poetry of political anguish at its best, both didactic and lyrical.

To Stay Alive, published in 1971, collected Levertov’s most considerable political poems. This book recorded American’s inner and outer experience during the sixties and the beginning of the seventies, and honestly presented the political occurrences at that time in poetic form. This is a volume which gathers politics and poetic beauty together into a sense of wholeness. The poem “What Were They Like” in To Stay Alive is Levertov ‘s accusation of American Army’s atrocity toward not only the enemy but also innocent women and children in North Vietnam:

Did the people of Viet Nam

use lanterns of stone?

Did they hold ceremonies

to reverence the opening of buds?

Were they inclined to quiet laughter?

Did they use bone and ivory,

jade and silver, for ornament?

Had they an epic poem?

Did they distinguish between speech and singing?

Sir, their light hearts turned to stone.

It is not remembered whether in gardens

stone gardens illumined pleasant ways.

Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom,

but after their children were killed

there were no more buds.

Sir, laughter is bitter to the burned mouth.

A dream ago, perhaps. Ornament is for joy.

All the bones were charred.

it is not remembered. Remember,

most were peasants; their life

was in rice and bamboo.

When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies

and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces,

maybe fathers told their sons old tales.

When bombs smashed those mirrors

there was time only to scream.

There is an echo yet

of their speech which was like a song.
It was reported their singing resembled
the flight of moths in moonlight.
Who can say? It is silent now. (SA 123)

This is one of the unusual poems by Denise Levertov. The structure of this poem is like an interview between a questioner and an interviewer. In the first stanza, a questioner asks some questions about Vietnamese people's way of life, and then the second stanza presents the interviewer to answer each question. In the first section, the questioner asks questions regarding racial culture, people character, and life style. These questions remind us what had been lost because of war. And then the interviewer responds to all questions, but seems to be hesitant and shy with "It is not remembered." The poem with ghastly images such as "charred bones," "burned mouth," "killed children," and "smashed mirrors" present an atmosphere of anguish. Throughout the poem, the tone is bitter and angry; such a bitter tone seems to state that as long as there is the war, people would continue to suffer. The last lines of the poem show an appositive image of moths flying in the moonlight, which implies peace and hope whereas "there is an echo yet" expresses that nobody could be sure if the war would stop. The title "What Were They Like?" may also serve as a conclusion, which brings readers to think about after suffering the disaster of the war, these Vietnamese people lost their personal identities as people who unable to remember their culture any more.

III. The Latest Political Poems

During the Vietnam War, both Levertov and her husband, Mitchell Goodman,

were active demonstrators. They aggressively participated in the peace movements. In 1972, Levertov along with her friends Muriel Rukeyser and Jane Hart represented the Women's Union and Writer's to travel to North Vietnam. After returning, she went to many campuses to make speeches to students, and talked about what she had seen. For her, she never forgot many horror scenes of villages and even hospitals that had been destroyed by American troops. As she has always haunted the death of humankind, she joined in numerous antinuclear protests and freeze rallies and also protested against the Gulf War. In 1991, as the U.S. bombed Baghdad, Levertov immediately participated in anti-war movement against the war on Iraq. The poem"In California during the Gulf War" in Evening Train, here latest anti-war poem, won The Best American Poetry 1993, included in The Best American Poetry Series, edited by David Lehman. This poem is filled with her typical passion and love to intimates of the horrors of war:

Among the blight-killed eucalypts, among
trees and bushes rusted by Christmas frosts,
the yards and hillsides exhausted by five years of drought,

certain airy white blossoms punctually
reappeared, and dense clusters of pale pink, dark pink--
a delicate abundance. They seemed

like guests arriving joyfully on the accustomed
festival day, unaware of the year's events, not perceiving
the sackcloth others were wearing.

To some of us, the dejected landscape consorted well
with our shame and bitterness. Skies ever-blue,
daily sunshine, disgusted us like smile-buttons.

Yet the blossoms, clinging to thin branches
more lightly than birds alert for flight,
lifted the sunken heart

even against its will.
But not
as symbols of hope: they were flimsy
as our resistance to the crimes committed

--again, again--in our name; and yes, they return,
year after year, and yes, they briefly shone with serene joy
over against the dark glare

of evil days. They *are*, and their presence
is quietness ineffable--and the bombings *are*, were,
no doubt will be; that quiet, that huge cacophany

simultaneous. No promise was being accorded, the blossoms
were not doves, there was no rainbow. And when it was claimed
the war had ended, it had not ended. (ET 84)

In the words of "In California during the Gulf War," "when it was claimed / the war had ended, it had not ended." Levertov firmly believed that the war has not ended. To her, the so-called "peace" is not merely cease fire but the coming of a new world order.

"Dom Helder Camara at the Nuclear Test Site" in Sands of the Well is a Denise Levertov's peacemaking poem that mainly expresses the protest against the threat of nuclear weapon. Levertov and her friends, John Dear and Dan Berrigan take part in an annual protest movement to oppose nuclear weapons in the Nevada Desert. Brazilian Archbishop Dom Helder Camara leads the crowd to beseech the God for hope and peace:

> Dom Helder, octagenarian wisp
> of human substance arrived from Brazil
> raises his arms and gazes toward
> a sky pallid with heat, to implore
> 'Peace!'
> -- - then waves a 'goodbye for now'
> to God, as to a compadre.
> "The Mass is over, go in peace
> to love and serve the Lord': he walks
> down with the rest of us to cross
> the cattle-grid, entering forbidden ground
> where marshals wait with their handcuffs. (SW 114-15)

Denise Levertov's political poetry evokes the horror of war, and provides us with a

new vision of peace. When we readers experience the war and injustice through the poet's eyes, we value the importance of poetry for catharsis reading, especially during such dark ages like those mentioned in her poetry.

Chapter Six

Religion

During the Vietnam War, Levertov saw the horrors of war and the sorrows of people, so she decided to participate in the anti-war movement, not only through personal action, but also through writing poems of what she saw. Her own life experience resorted to her words in the poems, so the themes of her poems began to center on public and political issues derived from her earlier poems of exploring the relationship of self to nonself. Yet, more than before, it became clear that Levertov's formal artistic creation was different from the past. After Vietnam War ended, Levertov developed her life into a mysteries statement of religious conviction. Her poems turned to focus on the Christian mystery because she perceived her energy seemed to be with religious power to release. She was in the process of looking deeply into the mystery, not only communicating with harsh realities, but also offering a vision of human experience of intellectual life. In her essay "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival" in The Poet in the World: "It is difficult / to get news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there." She believes that people need poetry for "some kind of illumination, for revelations that help them to survive, to survive in spirit not only in body." In "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," she also expresses a theme which she repeated on many occasions throughout her career that poetry is "the poet or artist's call to summon the divine" (NSE 143). Writing poems becomes the poet's means of summoning the divine.

"A Poet's View" she mentions again the poet's task:

> To believe, as an artist, in inspiration or the intuitive, to know that

> without Imagination...no amount of acquired craft or scholarship or of brilliant reasoning will suffice, is to live with a door of one's life open to the transcendent, the numinous. Not every artist, clearly, acknowledges that fact—yet all, in the creative act, experience mystery. The concept of 'inspiration' presupposes a power that enters the individual and is not a personal attribute; and it is linked to a view of the artist's life as one of obedience to a vocation. David Jones wrote in one of his essays of the artist's impulse to gratuitously set up altars to the unknown god; and I alluded to the passage from what was then an agnostid standpoint. Later, that unknown began to be defined for me as God…
>
> …In the matter of religion…I have moved in the last few years…to a position of Christian belief….[T]he movement has been…gradual and continuous….
>
> (qtd. in Marten 161-62)

In "A Poet's View," Levertov declares clearly that the "acknowledgment, and celebration, of mystery probably constitutes the most consistent theme of my poetry from its very beginnings." Her poems of mystery are primarily through the imagination:

> It must be therefore by the exercise of that faculty that one moves toward faith, and possibly by its failure that one rejects it as delusion.... Where Wallace Stevens says, 'God and the imagination are one,' I would say the imagination, which synergizes intellect, emotion and instinct, is the perceptive organ through which it is possible, though not inevitable, to experience God. (qtd. in Marten 162)

I. The Earlier Religious Poems

Denise Levertov wrote many poems with religious themes throughout her career. Levertov's religious consciousness started from very young age because she was deeply influenced by her culture and her family root since she was a child. When she began to write, her belief became an important theme in her poetry. She liked to explore deep spiritual understanding and truth in her poems. Her father's religion with both Judaism and Christianity affected her sense toward a deep faith in God.

Denise Levertov claimed that from the age of about ten she knew she was an artistic person and had a destiny. Her early experiences of connecting nature taught her to revernce, to pay attention, to see, so her religious poem would express "nothingness and absence" from a concept of the Transcendentalism of Thoreau and Emerson; all of these things shaped her poetry. "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" in her book Relearning the Alphabet describes an obvious connection between the human being and the natural world. This poem uses the personalifcation of a tree; "I," the tree, becomes a persona in the poem. The tree changes and grows when it hears the music of Orpheus, an ancient poet and musician, who possessed musical power to be able to move inanimate objects. "Orpheus" is also a metaphor of spirituality. In the beginning, "sea-wind" blows in "valley with rumors of salt,/ of treeless horizons." Yet the tree "was the first to see him." "He was a man." The tree is "not afraid, only deeply alert" about a concept of the connection with the human world spreading through the natural world. The tree then explains his feelings involved in this connection:

> And what I felt was no longer a dry tingling:
> I seemed to be singing as he sang, I seemed to know

what the lark knows; all my sap was mounting towards the sun that by now had risen, the mist was rising, the grass was
drying, yet my roots felt music moisten them
deep under earth.
He came still closer, leaned on my trunk:
the bark thrilled like a leaf still-folded.
Music! There was no twig of me not trembling with joy and fear. Then as he sang it was no longer sounds only that made the
music: (Poems 68-72 79)

The tree understands the mystical connection between the natural and the human world. “Then as he/sang it was no longer sounds only that made the/ music: /he spoke, and as no tree listens I listened, and language/ came into my roots.” This tree is able to connect with the person because it listens to the human and accepts the connection. Then the human tells the tree his dream:

he dreamed he would take some
day deeper than roots ...
He told of the dreams of man, wars, passions, griefs,
and I, a tree, understood words – ah, it seemed
my thick bark would split like a sapling's that grew too fast in the spring
when a late frost wounds it.

Fire he sang, that trees fear, and I, a tree, rejoiced in its flames.
New buds broke forth from me though it was full summer.

As though his lyre (now I knew its name) were both frost and fire, its
chords flamed up to the crown of me.
I was seed again.
I was fern in the swamp.
I was coal. (Poems 68-72 80)

The poet demonstrates in this poem that people's connections with nature could be recognized if viewed with an open mind. When the tree begins to acknowledge a connection:"and I, a tree, understood words," it is to build a stronger connection with the humans. That is to say the poet ultimately expects to be able to cross the boundaries between the humans and the nature. Levertov regards the tree's recognizion process as a spiritual growing, she unites such growing to protray how the tree is like faith, and as the tree experiences life we also experience a spiritual journey. Levertov's earlier religious poems concerned a theme about people's respect for nature and life.

Levertov employs the imagination on her way to God which is seen in a poem entitled "Overland to the Islands" in her second American book with same title:

Let's go—much as that dog goes,
intently haphazard. The
Mexican light on a day that
'smells like autumn in Connecticut'
makes iris ripples on his
black gleaming fur—and that too
is as one would desire—a radiance

consorting with the dance.

Under his feet
rocks and mud, his imagination, sniffing,
engaged in its perceptions—dancing
edgeways, there's nothing
the dog disdains on his way,
nevertheless he
keeps moving, changing
pace and approach but
not direction—'every step an arrival.' (CEP 55)

The dog in the poem is symbolized as an image of Denise Levertov. Early in her poetic career, Levertov still explored her poetic discovery, so she analogized herself as intently haphazard leaping of a joyful dog. This animated creature with his feet leads himself to explore anywhere to satisfy his curiosity. As Audrey T. Rodgers says:

> The simile, humorous and serious simultaneously, will describe Levertov's own 'intently haphazard' pilgrimage over the next thirty years: a wandering, but not without direction; a dance, a voyage of the imagination. That pilgrimage will be in the real world, the same world as that of the radiant, sniffing, moving, changing dog. (213)

The poem ends with an announcement of "every step an arrival." The poet contemplates her poetic journey to suggest her every step she treaded would

ultimately arrive at a destination. Such an arrival is Levertov's intently haphazard poetic discovery she always made along that way. "[T]he long road of Denise Levertov's voyage, the arrival variously suggests the gaining of wisdom, an instant of hope, an epiphanic moment, a sense of the joy of living that gives her poetry the radiance consorting with the dance" (Rogers 213). Besides, Denise Levertov uses line-breaks to imitate the dog's breath—hesitating briefly to find the direction, and adopts short lines with long ones to make the reader's mind to follow the eyes to move up and down simultaneously; such a device gives readers an image of "intently haphazard" dog's paces.

II. The Latest Religious Poems

Three sources shaped Denise Levertov's religious poems—her Christian inheritance from her a strict religious upbringing; her family roots in Judaism and Hasidism; and "natural supernaturalism" of her romantic poetics. Such a multicultural background makes her composing a poem like a journey of seeking for God. She called every poem an "act of faith." Under this sense, while walking on the road of writing, she seemed to "venture into the unknown" with imagination. As Joan F. Hallisey says in his "Denise Levertov's 'Illustrious Ancesstors,'" Denise Levertov believed that "the presenc of figures like these in a person's imagination can help to create a kind of 'personal mythology' and function as a source of confidence and inspiration for the artist" (260). In the essay "A Sense of Pilgrimage" in The Poet in the World, she mentions that her poetics at times utilized religious symbolism and ritual to seek for mythic force of the unknown. Such a power of Christian myth is presented in her two collections, Candles in Babylon and Breathing the Water. Here long-winded Vientnam War had ended in 1975. Levertov's poetic theme

converts to relitious quest from political commitment.

Readers shall easily perceive Lervertov's alteration in Candles in Babylon. Her poetry becomes more religious and spiritual, and her attempt at removing her from public considerations is obvious. The poem "Candles in Babylon" deals with a theme of discarding the doubt and searching for a reassuring faith on the road of poetic pilgrimage. The poem is endowed with biblical knowledge. According to 25 Jeremiah, in the first year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign over Babylon, God punished His people in Babylon for people's divisiveness, people's worship of the false idol, and people's distrust toward God. Later, God pardoned them and regarded them as a scattered sheep. Jeremiah, a prophet, expressed with the tone of despair due to God's wrath but also with the key of celebration because of getting God's forgiveness. Thus, for Levertov, the modern city is Babylon, although chaotic and dark, it is also light and hope:

Through the midnight streets of Babylon
between the steel towers of their arsenals,
between the torture castles with no windows,
we race by barefoot, holding tight
our candles, trying to shield
The shivering flames, crying
"Sleepers Awake!"
hoping
the rhyme's promise was true,
that we may return
from this place of terror

home to a calm dawn and

the work we had just begun. (CB 2)

The beginning of the poem offers the images of ruin and destruction like “the steel towers of their arsenals,” “the torture castles with no windows,” and “shivering flames” to try to deliver a desperate voice. However, “hoping” that is put alone in the back of line eight, turns in another tone with renewal toward a new day. Juxtaposition of “hoping” and “place of terror” produces a dramatic conflict but also keeps a perfect balance. Lastly, “home” representing security and peace of mind, also suggests calmness and quietness. “Candles in Babylon” successfully deals with poetic devices: the contrasts of language, images, enjambment, contrasts and dramatic shift. By these devices the poem reaches a powerful intensity. Lervertov always asserts that the poet had his own mission in the world,as she said, “I am not a fatalist. But I’m … very much aware daily and constantly of terror. I don’t mean that I go around being ‘terrified’ but this is a major terror…the power [nuclear power] that is in the hands of human being for the first time—that is our precedent…. But I haven’t lost hope” (qtd. in Rodgers 160-61). “Candles in Babylon” awakens people in the world about the coming dangers.

Oblique Prayer, published in 1984, continues to manifest Levertov’s consistent style of self-directed and introspective, the book presents the destruction of the natural world in order to remind us of the pollution of environment and the continuation of nuclear testing. “Prisoners” in Oblique Prayer reveals that people’s role as “prisoner” who “must eat/ our ration.”

Though the road turns at last

to death's ordinary door,

and we knock there, ready

to enter and it opens

easily for us,

yet

all the long journey

we shall have gone in chains,

fed on knowledge-apples

acrid and riddled with grubs.

We taste other food that life,

like a charitable farm-girl,

holds out to us as we pass—

but our mouths are puckered,

a taint of ash on the tongue.

It's not joy that we've lost—

wildfire, it flares

in dark or shine as it will.

What's gone

is common happiness,

plain bread we could eat

with the old apple of knowledge.

That old one—it griped us sometimes,

but it was firm, tart,

sometimes delectable ...

The ashen apple of these days

grew from poisoned soil. We are prisoners

and must eat

our ration. All the long road

in chains, even if, after all,

we come to

death's ordinary door, with time

smiling its ordinary

long-ago smile. (OP 43)

The poem uses a metaphor and contrast of the apples: "old apple of knowledge" and the poisoned apple we eat as prisoners. The image of the prisoners who "must eat/ our ration is a sharp suggestion that we are actually the prisoners of our own acts. The poem offers an ultimate irony, beginning with the road to death's door and ending with a reminder that "we come to/ death's ordinary door, with time/ smiling its ordinary/ long-ago smile." Denise Levertov wrote many metaphysical poems to show her religious views. She discussed much about religion and individuals and often used Christianity as bridge to explore people's relations with God.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

Denise Levertov was born near London in 1923, of Russian and Welsh descent. In 1948, she married the American writer Mitchell Goodman, and became American by marriage. Before she went to live in the United States, she had already published her first book in England; Kenneth Rexroth had given her a title as "the baby of the New Romanticism." However, at that time, British writers did not have special works to influence the literary world by then, so Levertov indicates: "Marrying an American and coming to live here while still young was very stimulating to me as a writer, for it necessitated the finding of new rhythm in which to write, in accordance with new rhythm of life and speech" (Allen and Butterick 401).

While Levertov began to search for new rhythm, she was introduced to be familiar with the poets of the Black Mountain and William Carlos Williams. By then, she as well admitted that they had a great effect upon her; especially, William Carlos Williams's writing style and Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse," that one perception immediately and directly leads to a further perception. Under their influences, Her status transferred from a British Romantic to an American poet with her "new rhythm." "Overland to the Islands" is also a good example of her developing with what she called "new rhythm." This poem begins with the casual request and then invites the dog to appear: "Let's go—much as that dog goes/ intently haphazard." As readers read the poem, they move with this dog, so this dog can be said to be the projective movement in the poem. He leads the readers to move from one perception to another one. The last phrase, "every step an arrival," Levertov said in "The Sense of Pilgrimage," "is quoted from Rilke, and here, unconsciously, I

was evidently trying to unify for myself my sense of the pilgrim way with my new American, objectivist-influenced, pragmatic, and sensuous longing for the Here and Now" (NSE 69). Levertov defined the pilgrim way as "a personal fiction." Such a personal fiction was written through her outward eyes with her inner experience to see into the everyday reality, so life, for her, was like a pilgrimage. Hence, Levertov always placed herself into this confusing world in order to pursue an actual state of affairs. In "Overland to the Islands," this ordinary dog with his "gleaming fur" is regarded as God in the physical form of a creature. The rocks and mud under his feet become essential obstacles to progress.

Levertov once stated that her poetics mainly discussing one's inner discoveries is associated with outward perception. She especially emphasized such an idea in her criticism, The Poet in the World, —"there is a form in all things which the poet can discover and reveal" (7), so her poems usually came from her real experiences with honesty:

> Perhaps I don't know myself very well, for at times I see myself as having boundless energy and a savage will, and at other times as someone easily tired and so impressionable as to be, like Keats, weighed down almost unbearably by the identities around me. (PW 216)

Levertov also thought that it is essential to combine receptivity and creative energy to become a poet to fully use the senses to observe the world. While reading her poetry and prose, the readers realize that "vision," "inscape," "revelation" are key words, and these words are cited from Coleridge, Emerson, and Rilke. She also quoted a statement of Carlyle's "Prospectus" from Sartor Resartus in her The Poet in

the World:

> A musical thought is one spoken by a mind that has penetrated to the inmost heart of the thing; detectd the inmost mystery of it, namely the melody that lies hidden in it; the inward harmony of coherence which is its soul. Whereby it exists and has a right to be, here in the world. (PW 229)

Moreover, she also analogized that "to write is to listen" as Picasso's "to draw is to shut your eyes and sing" (PW 229). Carlyle, Picasso, Levertov all agreed that the process of creating correlated inside as well as outside.

In Levertov's poetics, the eyes also play a principal job to see all things to bring into her poems. In "Pleasures," eyes become a tool of revealing the hidden inscape of objects:

> I like to find
> what's not found
> at once, but lies
>
> within something of another nature,
> in repose, distinct.
> Gull feathers of glass, hidden
>
> in white pulp: the bones of squid
> which I pull out and lay
> blade by blade on the draining board--

tapered as if for swiftness, to pierce
the heart, but fragile, substance
belying design. Or a fruit, mamey,

cased in rough brown peel, the flesh
rose-amber, and the seed:
the seed a stone of wood, carved and

polished, walnut-colored, formed
like a brazilnut, but large,
large enough to fill
the hungry palm of a hand.

I like the juicy stem of grass that grows
within the coarser leaf folded round,
and the butteryellow glow

in the narrow flute from which the morning-glory
opens blue and cool on a hot morning. (CEP 90)

Levertov always not only is fascinated with the things inside other things but also loved to find out the unknown within the known. Thus, poetry depends upon, she said, “utmost attentiveness” to substantiate. Levertov’s poetry developed an organic concept with linking voices and eyes, so the final apperception of the “inscape” became the poem. Such poem revealed the process of thoughts and feelings; it

could be an art of relationships both inside and outside.

Levertov's organic poetry concerns about the interaction between inside and outside, and embraces three key points as follows:

Firstly, common things are selected into her poems with apperception to the balance of the ideal and the real. After she moved to America, she learned to use her poet's eyes to observe the trivial things in her life, and through these things she grasped their unusual beauty. Levertov has strong power of comprehension; she not only changes ordinary things into extraordinary matters, but also is able to realize the uncommon features that people cannot perceive. Besides, as a poet, she also understands that extreme happiness, disappointment, success, gain and loss, and sincereness cannot be happened in her career, so it is important that she can do her best to find out the existence of beauty and pureness among the vulgarity, and to taste sweet and refreshing after experiencing the torture. For example, in her poem "settling," the color "grey" is essential one in our life like other colors. "Grey" is an interim color to connect with others colors, so Levertov gets the enlightenment through the color "grey" appeared in the natural world. She thinks that the life intermingles sorrow and joy; thus, the poet should employ poetry to comfort the mind that has suffered for a long time. Such an attitude makes Levertov's poems showing a balance between the ideal and the real. She is really good at seeing clearly the truth, and also conceives God's grace through knowing the coexistence between joy and sorrow. Levertov tries to balance the ideal and the real, the soul and the flesh, and spiritual and physical relation. In her plenty of poems, she always expresses a clear concept that explores the soul of the art to match spiritual needs of the ordinary life. During the process of exploring, Levertov's poetry is a poetry of the eye; that is, her sense of sight brings into full play. For her, the function of eyes prefers displaying her

own journey of art rather than instructing. Through seeing and discovering, she not only finds out the thing's inscape but also grasps artic soul. Besides, she uses her sense of sight to communicate and cooperate with readers to finish the journey of art.

Secondly, the poet shall be involved in society to regard poetry as art and life. Levertov sometimes was thought as a member of the Beat Generation in the fifties because her latest poetry concerns about social-cultural issues. She thinks that she needs to step on the road toward real world if desiring to explore the meaning of life. She believes that the art not only comes from the life, but also expresses the life. As a female poet, she cares about women's marriage problems. Because she experiences the failure of marriage in her middle age, she has different thoughts from others while considering this issue. Her attitude does not blame everyone and everything; her contemplation is profound and tries to see into the bottom of the matter. She is not like her peers such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton suffer from mental problem while facing the frustration, and gradually come to an end of their lives. She is brave to face her life as a poet. Moreover, she went to Vietnam to witness the bloody scenes in the war. She cannot imagine that such an act of violence would be happened. She often blames the horror of the Vietnam War through writing poems. The war makes her feel shocked and awakens her conscience. She feels that she needs to utter the angry voice to present her anti-war stance, so she aggressively attends many movements. Since then she begins to notice about some social issues. Levertov has strong social responsibility. She firmly protests the ugliness of human nature. She takes part in annual protest movement to oppose nuclear weapon, and soon she becomes a political activist. The Black Mountain poet Robert Duncan criticizes that she puts much political concerns into her poems, so these two good friends ultimately choose to quit their partnership. Levertov hopes people can re-examine the war's existence through

her appeal. In 1972, when NBC-TV invited Levertov to comment the war, she prefaced her response with a definition of the poet's task: "to say or sing all that he or she can, to deal with as much of the world as becomes possible to him or her in language" (Archer 2009). At that time, many poets in America preferred to be a hermit than to involve in the political movement but Levertov elaborates her moral and thinking stance. Poet Robert Creeley said when interviewed by Mel Gussow of New York Times: "She was a constantly defining presence in the world we shared, a remarkable and transforming poet for all of us. She always had a vivid emotional response and also a completely dedicated sense of political and social need."

The last, Levertov also demonstrates a sincere spirit toward God is throughout her poetry. Levertov thinks that the poet's task is to connect with some phenomena by poems. Her inner mind opens to the God, so her poetry's description is beyond the common motion; it directly leads into a profound space of art and becomes a beautiful power in the literary world. Her father's religion with both Judaism and Christianity affected upon her sense toward a deep faith in God, so the recognition and praise to mysterious power become her poetic theme. By the guidance of this mysterious power, she is able to find out the God's voices. For her, God is her spiritual support. As long as having such a strong spiritual power like God, her eyes can see into more deep spiritual level. God becomes her imagination. After passing this passage into the world of imagination, readers are leaded into the temple of art. Furthermore, England Romanticism influences a concept that God is often connected with an idea of imagination, so Levertov devotes her career to chase for the imagination and mystical expression. She says in "A Poet's View" that, "the imagination, which synergizes intellect, emotion and instinct, is the perceptive organic through which it is possible, though not inevitable, to experience God" (NSE 246). Levertov's poetry rids of

commonplace by searching for and listening God's voices, so her poetry can transcend the ordinary poet's vision to present the greatest charm.

In her more than twenty books of poems, Levertov has proven herself a poet of changes. From her first poems with rather formalized style to her latest poems with spiritual mediations, she presented the variety. As Marten indicates, "she has offered a mix of communicative possibilities: the lyric together with the narrative, the visionary with the reportorial the mythic with the everyday intense intimacies and public proclamations" (6). Levertov always clarified that the artist should be as an observer or an imaginative creator to display the commonplace routines of human experience. More than that, her poem addressed many socio-political themes, like the Vietnam War, the Detroit riots, and nuclear disarmament. Her aim is to awake others into a concern of these various issues, such as the Vietnam War and ecological problems. However, with her political involvement, she moved from despair to joy. Her poems began to use Christianity to combine culture and commuity. She trusted that terrible environment of community could be modified by Christian views, so she worked this into her poems. As William Slaughter in The Imagination's Tongue says, "The function of the poet is to put us into the world, not to take us out of it. Levertov knows that. Poetry has nothing to do with escape. It has to do with involvement, engagement" (qtd. in Rodgers 212). Denise Levertov creates a highly regarded body of poetry that reflects her beliefs as an artist and a humanist.

Abbreviation

The titles of the volume of poetry and essays are abbreviated in the text as follows:

Poetry:

1. CEP Colleted Earlier Poems 1940-1960
2. Poems 60-67 Denise Levertov Poems 1960-1967
3. Poems 68-72 Denise Levertov Poems 1968-1972
4. LF Life in the Forest
5. TS O Taste and See
6. WE With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads
7. FD The Freeing of the Dust
8. ET Evening Train
9. BW Breathing the Water
10. LU The Life Around Us
11. SA To Stay Alive
12. SW Sands of the Well
13. CB Candles in Babylon
14. OP Oblique Prayer

Essays:

1. NSE New & Selected Essays
2. PW The Poet in the World
3. LC Light Up the Cave

Works Cited

Allen, Donald, and George F. Butterick. The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revised. New York: Grove, 1982.

Archer, Emily. "In the Land of Shinar." 2009. <http://www.answers.com/topic/in-the-land-of-shinar-poem-7>. 28 Oct. 2009.

Bodo, Murray. Image Journal Issue 27. Seattle, 1999. <http://Imagejournal.org/page/journal/articles/issue-27/bodo-essay>. 30 Sept. 2009.

Breslin, James E. B. "Denise Levertov." Ed. Albert Gelpi. Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism. Michigan: Michigan UP, 1993.

Estess, Sybil. "Denise Levertov." American poetry Observed: Poets on Their Work. Ed. Joe David Bellamy. Urbana and Chicago: Illinois UP, 1987.

Gelpi, Albert, ed. Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism. Michigan: Michigan UP, 1993.

Griffiths, Ivor. "Denise Levertov The Dead Butterfly." Poet. 27 Aug 2007. < http://www.blog.poet.me.uk/denise-levertov.htm>. 23 Oct. 2009.

Gussow, Mel. "Denise Levertov, Poet and Political Activist, Dies at 74." New York Times. 28 Dec 1997. <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/23/arts/denise-levertov-poet-and-political-activist-dies-at-74.html >. 28 Oct.2009.

Hampl, Patricia. "A Witness of Our Time." Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism. Michigan: Michigan UP, 1993.

Ignatow, David. "Review of The Freeing of the Dust." Ed. Albert Gelpi. Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism. Michigan: Michigan UP, 1993.

Lacey, Paul A. "The Poetry of Political Anguish." Ed. Albert Gelpi. Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism. Michigan: Michigan UP, 1993.

Levertov, Denise. Collected Earlier Poems, 1940-1960. New York: New Direction, 1979.

---. Poems 1960-1967. New York: New Direction, 1966.

---. Poems 1968-1972. New York: New Direction, 1987.

---. New & Selected Essays. New York: New Direction, 1992.

---. O Taste and See. New York: New Direction, 1964.

---. Breathing the Water. New York: New Direction, 1987.

---. Candles in Babylon. New York: New Direction, 1982.

---. Evening Train. New York: New Direction, 1992.

---. The Freeing of the Dust. New York: New Direction, 1975.

---. The Life Around Us. New York: New Direction, 1997.

---. Life in the Forest. New York: New Direction, 1978.

---. Light Up the Cave. New York: New Direction, 1981.

---. Oblique Prayers: New Poems with 14 Translations from Jean Joubert**.** New York: New Direction, 1984.

---. With Eyes at the Back of Our Head. New York: New Direction, 1959.

---. To Stay Alive. New York: New Direction, 1971.

---. Sands of the Well. New York: New Direction, 1996.

---. The Poet in the World. New York: New Direction, 1973.

MacGowan, Christopher, ed. The Letters of Denise Levertov and William Carlos Williams. New York: A New Directions Book, 1998.

Marten, Harry. Understanding Denise Levertov. Columbia: South Carolina UP, 1988.

Mersmann, James F. “Denise Levertov’s Life and Career.” 1974. < http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/levertov/life.htm>. 5 Oct. 2009.

Middleton, Darren J.N, ed. God, Literature, and Process Thought. Aldershot, Hants, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002.

Poets. "Denise Levertov- The Academy of American Poets." 18 March 2001. <http://www.poets.org.> 5 Oct. 2009.

Rodgers, Audrey T. Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Engagement. London and Toronto: Associated UP, 1992.

Rosenthal, M. L. The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War Ⅱ. New York: Oxford UP, 1967.

Silliman, Ron. “Unerasing Early Levertov.” Pennysylvania, 1997. < http://jacketmagazine.com/36/lev-silliman.shtml>. 5 Oct. 2009.

Schley, Jim. “Among the Birds: Levertov and Nathan.” 1998. < http://www.jimschley.com/html/levertov-nathan.html>. 5 Oct. 2009.

Wagner, Linda Welshimer. “The Gods Die Every Day.” Denise Levertov. Twayne’s United States Author Series. Ed. College and University Press. New Haven, Conn.: Twayne Publishers, 1967.

Zlotkowski, Edward. “Levertov and Rilke: A Sense of Aesthetic Ethics.” Twentieth Century Literature, Vol. 38, No. 3, Denise Levertov Issue. Hempstead: Hofstra UP, 1992.