DENISE LEVERTOV: CELEBRATED CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMAN POET OF PERCEPTIVENESS AND GREAT WISDOM¹

Surapeepan Chatraporn²

Abstract

Denise Levertov possessed an ability to capture and perceive mystical reality in apparently ordinary experience. Her sensitivity to sensuous daily life, her attention to the familiar and her application of the concrete to the spiritual opened the gates of mystery of the world and evoked spiritual insight into the essence and secrets of life overlooked or unseen by most people. Levertov's enthusiasm for life in whatever circumstances and her persistent articulation of joy were drawn from her concern of living life to the fullest because only life experienced to the fullest could enrich and enlighten man. Though not defining herself as a feminist, Levertov spoke with a distinctively feminine but strong voice and wisely expressed a contemporary woman's perspectives on female identity, female strength, female wisdom, and female complexity while subtly advocating sexual equality. Her perceptive views of love and marriage

¹This paper was presented at the third international conference on "Gender and Equity Issues: Humanistic Considerations for the 21st Century" held in Bangkok from July 4-6, 2001.

²Lecturer, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

as well as her keen understanding of womanhood well reflected the changing roles and status of contemporary women.

No other contemporary American poet has held so secure a place in the list of established poets for such a long period of time. For over forty years Denise Levertov's poems have been included in nearly all anthologies of contemporary poetry - besides her own sixteen collections of poetry and two volumes of essays. Levertov (1923-1997) is acknowledged to be one of the premier women poets of modern-day America. Nicholas O'Connell wrote in "A Poet's Valediction," "Denise Levertov was much loved by her readers and an inspiration to several generations of poets."³ James Laughlin wrote in "For the Record: On New Directions and Others," "... she is an inspiring, loving and lovable person. My admiration for her continually increases."⁴

Her fame, her popularity, and her being held in high esteem by her readers partly stemmed from her ability to capture and perceive mystical reality in apparently ordinary experience. Her sensitivity to sensuous daily life, her attention to the familiar and the mundane and her application of the concrete to the spiritual opened the gates to the mysteries of life and evoked spiritual insight into the essence of things, the "authentic" and the secrets of life often overlooked or unseen by most people.

The majority of her poems concern the happenings of everyday life and reveal her sensitive response to these sensuous daily details. The title of one of her frequently-anthologized poems "O Taste

and See,” which appeared in the poetry collection (1964) by the same name, displays her attention to commonplace daily items and illustrates her love of direct physical experience. The poem appeals directly or indirectly to all the five senses: the sense of touch, the sense of smell, the sense of hearing, and, particularly, the sense of sight, and the sense of taste.

By portraying ordinary, familiar images, Levertov urges us to experience life both physically and emotionally, to live to the fullest, to taste, to feel and to see everything possible. She advises us to respond perceptively and actively to the physical world all around us and to bring all our senses to savor the physical experience offered by the mundane world.

O Taste and See

*The world is
not with us enough.*

O taste and see

*The subway Bible poster said,
meaning **The Lord**, meaning
if anything all that lives
to the imagination's tongue,*

*grief, mercy, language,
tangerine, weather, to
breathe them, bite,
savor, chew, swallow,
transform*

*into our flesh our
deaths, crossing the street,
plume, quince,
living in the orchard and
being*

*hungry, and plucking
the fruit.*

Levertov twisted the well-known line from Wordsworth's poem "The World Is Too Much With Us" into her opening lines "The world is not with us enough" and she exhorted us to "taste and see" the sensory world enthusiastically. She transformed the phrase on the subway Bible poster into her own "meaning." She urged us to "taste and see" not only "tangerine" and "weather" but "all that lives to the imagination's tongue," meaning all experience, physical as well as emotional. Levertov exhorted actively taking the world into ourselves, transforming it "into our flesh our/deaths," into our physical being; experience, in this way, is poetically embodied, incarnated. Moreover, it is "all that lives" and even "our deaths" that we are exhorted to assimilate so that nothing can distance us from experience.

In the poem's closing lines, Levertov, again enacting its theme, transformed both the myth of Eden and the world of the present by identifying the two, depicting us as "living in an orchard and being // hungry" and rather than referring to biblical prohibitions, "plucking/ the fruit," as Adam had done. Levertov reversed the biblical scene and invited us to eat the fruit. In Levertov's mythology, of course, plucking and eating the fruit was precisely the "new way" to energize the self and expand its field of activity.⁵ For Levertov, a life without sensuous contacts seemed to be a life without meaning.

A series of static nouns “grief, mercy, language, / tangerine, weather” at first define experience. But then human activity is introduced in a series of infinitive phrases “to breathe,” “bite / savor, chew, swallow, transform” so as to urge action. Then all actions are rendered in present participles “crossing,” “living,” and “plucking.” At the end of the poem, the self hungrily takes in new experience and, thus, becomes a continually moving and constantly reformed center.

Taking the entire sensory world into the body and transforming all experience into our very physical being enhances both perception and insight into the nature of reality. This is because tangible objects are in themselves signs of their own secret mystery. A communion with sensuous everyday objects can help open the gates of mystery of the world and evoke spiritual insight into the essence of nature and the secrets of life.

“Pleasures” expresses Levertov’s delight in discovering what “lies // within something of another nature.”

*I like to find
what’s not found
at once, but lies*

*within something of another
nature,
in repose, distinct. (1-5)*

Her attention to tangible objects and small natural details empowered her to discover the mystery that lay beyond the surface of things. With intense scrutiny, she could perceive both their outer and inner compositions.

. . . 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. (12-24)*

Levertov used images of nature to speak of the abstract, to explore and discover the unknown. She probed beneath the threshold of the familiar, the here and now and found the transcendent, the mystical within the stuff of immediate experience. Clearly one reaches eternity and perceives the essence of things by going deeper into today, by scrutinizing commonplace objects. Like Thoreau, who saw the water of Walden Pond as connected with the sacred water of the Ganges, Levertov looked into ordinary experience and perceived mystical reality lying beneath it. For Levertov, mundane materials could permit flight of the imagination. The eyes and the other senses may be as close to

the divine as any speculative brain, if not closer. The shaman's sticks and bones are as much signs of human spiritual imagination as abstracted theology may be. Levertov may have had William Blake's "Everything that is, is Holy" in mind when she called one of her poems, which appeared in *Here and Now* (1958), "Everything That Acts Is Actual."

Levertov's poems not only disclose mystical reality perceived in apparently ordinary experience but also reflect the poet's persistent articulation of joy - joy in self, delight in life, and sheer pleasure in pure being. In different poems, her frequently mystical self-definitions achieve varying degrees of intensity. In "Stepping Westward," for instance, she was "realistic," scrupulously celebrating "what, woman, // and who, myself, / I am."

Especially in her early collections, from *Overland to the Islands* (1958) through *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970), Levertov produced a succinct yet detailed record of experience in which the perceiving mind, confronting the apparent ordinariness of the world, is continually surprised by joy. A section of "Matins," from *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961), reveals the paradoxically insouciant reverence with which this poet of the particular could celebrate the visionary pleasures of daily reality. The whole poem reflects Levertov's enchantment with physical experience. Her lines below repeatedly praises "the authentic":

The authentic! I said
rising from the toilet seat.
The radiator in rhythmic
 knockings
spoke of the rising steam.
The authentic, I said
breaking the handle of my
 hairbrush as I
brushed my hair in
rhythmic strokes: That's it,
that's joy, it's always
a recognition, the known
appearing fully itself, and
more itself than one knew.

(12-23)

Later in this suite of ceremonial praise "the real, the new-laid / egg" and "the holy grains" of a child's breakfast are added to the poet's hairbrush, her "steaming bathroom" and kitchen "full of / things to be done" as loci of "Marvellous Truth," of the "terrible joy" - the awesome, eternal delight - which is always, in some sense, waiting to illuminate and transfigure the facade of the ordinary.

Levertov's persistent articulation of joy in self and delight in life, and her enthusiasm for life in whatever circumstances were drawn from her central concern of living life to the fullest. For Levertov, only life experienced completely could enrich and enlighten man. Her poetry celebrates strenuous life, reflects her joy-seeking temperament, and conveys her positive and vital visions. Through her work, Levertov emerged as a victor not a victim like Sylvia Plath. Levertov saw the sickness of a sick world and she discovered and applied the antidote for that sickness. She described the diseases of our time

through personal yet universal metaphors of anguish and endurance. Levertov found meaning in life, "... a form in all things (and in our experience) which the poet can discover and reveal."⁶ While Sylvia Plath saw death, Levertov saw life. Whereas Plath committed suicide, Levertov celebrated life and living. Levertov's affirmations of life were clearly revealed even in the titles of her poetry collections, to name merely one, *To Stay Alive* (1971). Levertov not only saw life but she felt hope and joy in existence. In so believing, she taught through her poems citing lessons from her own personal experience.

Although she did not designate herself as a feminist, Levertov spoke with a distinctively delicate and feminine but strong voice and wisely expressed a contemporary woman's perspectives on female identity, female strength, female wisdom and female complexity, while subtly advocating sexual equality. Her perceptive views of love and marriage as well as her keen understanding of womanhood realistically and truthfully reflected the changing roles and status of contemporary women.

In "Prayer for Revolutionary Love" from *The Freeing of the Dust* (1975), Levertov preached how to maintain the love relationship. The definitions of love for contemporary women are a sense of sharing, respect for each other, equality and, above all, respect for each other's work. These revolutionary definitions reflect sexual equality and emancipation of women. In the contemporary world women have "meaningful" jobs; they are economically, socially,

and politically independent and self-sufficient; they no longer have to depend on males as in the old days of patriarchal society.

That a woman not ask a man to
leave meaningful work to
follow her.

That a man not ask a woman to
leave meaningful work to
follow him.

That no one try to put Eros in
bondage.

But that no one put a cudgel in
the hands of Eros.

That our loyalty to one
another and our loyalty to
our work
not be set in false conflict.

That our love for each other
give us love for each
other's work.

That our love for each other's
work give us love for one
another. (1-8)

"About Marriage" from *O Taste and See* (1964) deals with the changing views of marriage and how to live a married life. Contemporary women are no longer objects of beauty and desire or sexual objects; they "About Marriage" from *O Taste and See* (1964) deals with the changing views of marriage and how to live a married life. Contemporary women are no longer objects of beauty and desire, or sexual objects; they are by no means treasures of their husbands or slaves to their male masters. Marriage is not by any means loss of independence and privacy. Nor is it

imprisonment for women. But marriage is "an encounter" between two people who love and understand each other and agree to share their lives without depriving each other of freedom.

*Don't lock me in wedlock, I
want
marriage, an
encounter - - (1-3)*

From the imagery of limitation, the poem proceeds to a description of a park in springtime scented with new grass, fresh leaves, and colorful blossoms. In this spring freshness and beauty, three male birds of passage are sporting with their mates. The speaker is enchanted by their freedom in boundless space. "The digression is not irrelevant" she maintains, for

*I would be
met

and meet you
so,
in a green

airy space, not
locked in. (35-41)*

Levertov revealed contemporary female identity and female complexity in a good number of her poems in which she portrayed an interesting but truthful image of the modern wife who differs completely from the traditional wife. Whereas the conventional wife is a dutiful wife, a self-sacrificing mother, a maid for all the family, and a selfless person, the modern wife maintains her individuality and freedom, nourishes her ambition, and aspires after achievements

in her career.

"The Woman" from *The Freeing of the Dust* (1975) deals with two conflicting personalities of the modern wife: the conventional wife and traditional housewife on one hand and the imaginative, ambitious and independent individualist on the other.

*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 (1-6)*

Being well aware of the two contradictory personalities within her and weary of the role of the quiet female ideal she has to fulfill, the modern woman yearns to merge her domestic self and her ambitious artistic self into a harmonious oneness. She can no longer limit herself within the feminine role in the masculine-defined world.

*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,

pierce the flesh of one, the
other
halfway across the world, will
shriek,
her blood will run . . . (15-23)*

Levertov ended her poem with a query. Is the male ready to accept the modern wife whose complexity and individual-

ity have combined to be her female strength?

*... Can you endure
life with two brides,
bridegroom? (23-24)*

In "Divorcing" from *The Freeing of the Dust* (1975), Levertov displayed her subtle insight into marriage. Married life is compared to a garland made of flowers, leaves, and thorns. The flowers and the leaves, though fragrant and sweet, are transient and must wither. Likewise, the thorns are a symbol of pain which the couple have to go through. The couple are bound together by the yoke of matrimony. This yoke, which is both literal and symbolic, can choke the couple. Excessive devotion and demanding for love may result in an end of marriage: "Drawn tight, it could choke us." (4) Levertov gave us a paradox of married life when she referred to it as a "fragment yoke." (6)

*One garland
of flowers, leaves, thorns
was twined round our two necks.
Drawn tight, it could choke us,
Yet we loved its scratchy grace,
yet we loved its scratchy grace,
our fragrant yoke. (1-6)*

For the modern woman equality, freedom, and respect for each other must be an integral part of married life. The modern woman is self-sufficient and ambitious in her career. If her marriage does not work, she is not apprehensive about divorce if the divorce will make her life better. Levertov wrote about women whose failure in marriage made them choose a new path in life.

"A Woman Alone" from *Life in the Forest* (1978) depicts a divorced woman who learns to work her way toward individual wholeness. Coming to terms with herself alone and having pondered over choice and commitment, she now enjoys the great freedom of singleness.

Whole, self-assured, and contented, the woman stakes out a direction in which women grow wise and independent, moving into age with joy, inner beauty, and wisdom. Rather than "shrinking to opposites," she expresses a "sober euphoria" of integrated, realized life and selfhood and celebrates her future as an old, but confident and strong, woman.

*a kind of sober euphoria makes
her believe
in her future as an old woman, ...
(31-32)*

In this poem of freedom, singleness, and feminine strength, Levertov created a "myth of a wise old woman." The old woman is happy with herself and proud of herself. She has learned from her experience and perceives the truth of life. She has learned to strengthen her mind, to handle age gracefully, and to live by herself honorably. She is now blessed with the solitude of life.

*But she thinks maybe
she could get to be tough and
wise, some way,
anyway. Now at least
she is past the time of mourning,
now she can say without shame
or deceit,
O blessed Solitude. (43-48)*

This poem is another proof of Levertov's subtle mind, superior perception, and sharp wisdom.

To conclude, her ability to capture and perceive reality and her sensitivity to ordinary daily experience opened the gates to the mysteries of life and evoked spiritual insight into the essence of things. Her perceptiveness included among others her nuanced understanding of female identity, of marriage, divorce, and living alone. Concerned with women's issues, Levertov composed, with delicacy and subtlety, poems of female complexity, female strength, and female wisdom; in so doing, she could convey, with admirable accuracy, truthful and realistic experiences of contemporary women in a touching, but not sentimental, manner.

Notes

³Nicholas O'Connell, "A Poet's Valediction," *Poets & Writers* May / June (1998): 20.

⁴James Laughlin, "For the Record: On New Directions and Others," *American Poetry* 50. 3 (Spring 1984): 280.

⁵James E. B. Breslin, "Denise Levertov," *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1993) 78.

⁶Denise Levertov, "Some Notes on Organic Form," *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1960) 7.

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