

Poets of Pilgrimage

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) and Denise Levertov (1923-1997)

By Robert Waldron

Denise Levertov died on December 20, 1997. She emigrated from Britain to America after World War II. Often associated with Robert Creeley and the Black Mountain School of Poetry, she was greatly influenced by American poets William Carlos Williams and Robert Duncan, publishing during her career more than 20 books of poetry as well as essays and translations. During the 1960s she was a controversial feminist poetic voice and often came under fire for writing defiantly political verse about the Vietnam War, a criticism she found baffling if not illogical, for poetry, she believed, embraces all aspects of life.

As she entered the '80s she wrote verse less politically motivated; in fact, she became well-known for her religious verse. Her volume *The Stream and the Sapphire: Selected Poems on Religious Themes* was published by New Directions in 1997 just before her death.

We know that poets Denise Levertov and Thomas Merton shared more than the same publisher, James Laughlin's New Directions Books. They both admired each other and read each other's work. They both were concerned about the ravages of war upon the innocent, the threat of nuclear war, violence, racism and all forms of injustice. They met only once, at Gethsemani on December 10, 1967; the day and month are significant for the date also marks the day and month not only of Merton's entrance into Gethsemani on December 10, 1941 but also of his death on December 10, 1968.

Merton discovered Levertov's verse in the early '60s and recommended her to several of his closest friends. On September 19, 1961, he wrote letters, one to his publisher James Laughlin and the other to his poetic critic Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, SDS. To Laughlin he wrote, "First of all the book of Denise Levertov just arrived. . . . This is poetry that really means something to me, not just poetry I like with my



Robert Waldron, a longtime teacher at Boston Latin School, has published essays in *The Merton Annual*, *The Merton Seasonal* and *The Merton Journal* (England). In addition to *Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul*, he is the author of *The Hound of Heaven: Epiphany, Poetry and the Spiritual Life* (Boston: Pauline Media, 1998).

Robert Waldron

head, poetry that I intellectually approve, that I can say 'is good.' She is one of the few poets into whose experience I can enter fully and with complete agreement and total acceptance. . . . She sees things as they are, in their spiritual nature, not with what Blake called single vision. But what is not seen in the seen." To Sister Thérèse he said, "I think it (her book, *With Eyes in the Backs of Their Heads*) is very fine, very spiritual in a broad, Jungian way."² On September 20, 1961, he wrote to his former college professor Mark Van Doren about Levertov, "I think you would like her."³ On October 14, 1961 to the poet and political activist Ernesto Cardenal he wrote, "There is a very fine new poet, Denise Levertov. . . . She is splendid, one of the most promising."⁴ Writing to a Vassar student about the poets that influenced him, Merton said, "Denise Levertov I respond to very much as a poet and a person."⁵

When Merton was reading and recommending Levertov to friends, I was in high school and had never heard of Denise Levertov. In fact, I first came across her name in Michael Mott's biography of Merton. Merton says about Levertov's visit, "I like Denise very much. A good warm person. She left a good poem ('Tenebrae') and we talked a little about Sister Norbert in San Francisco who is in trouble about protesting against the war."⁶

Later, when I was writing my own book on Merton, I made it my business to investigate the poet Merton so much admired. The first Levertov volume I read was *Breathing the Water*, which contains two exquisite poems on the fourteenth-century mystic Lady Julian of Norwich and her *Revelations of Divine Love*, an account of the sixteen "shewings" of "our heavenly mother Jesus."

My first encounter, however, with Lady Julian of Norwich had occurred when I read Thomas Merton's *Mystics and Zen Masters*. He wrote, "Julian of Norwich's is a theology of mercy, of joy, and of praise. Nowhere in all Christian literature are the dimensions of her Christian optimism excelled."⁷ His enthusiastic praise of her as the greatest of mystics caused me to rush to the library in search of her work. Needless to say, I fell in love with this mystic *par excellence* of love, hope and compassion.

When I read Denise Levertov's two beautiful poems about Julian ("The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich" and "On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX"), I felt I had discovered gold. Both poems remain favorites, and I recommend them to everyone interested in fine poetry and Lady Julian of Norwich. I wondered, however, if Denise Levertov discovered Julian as I had - through Thomas Merton.

While writing my Jungian commentary on the world-famous Trappist monk, *Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul*,⁸ I was haunted by Merton's prose-poem "Hagia Sophia" in which again he alludes to the lovely Lady Julian,

(When the recluses of fourteenth-century England heard their Church Bells and looked out upon the wolds and fens under a kind sky, they spoke in their hearts to "Jesus our Mother." It was Sophia that awakened in their childlike hearts.)⁹

I wanted verification about whether or not Merton had introduced Denise Levertov to the fourteenth-century mystic and/or if she'd been influenced by Merton's verse. In a letter

dated April 17, 1995, she kindly responded to my query; she wrote,

1. "I've read *very little* of Merton's poetry & it has been in no way an influence. I admire him tremendously & regret having met him only once. I've read a fair amount of his prose."
2. "I heard of Julian of Norwich in my childhood, but didn't read the Showings until the late '70's."
3. "I shall read more of Merton's poetry eventually - have long intended to."

At the end of her letter she says, "I did some Jungian work in the 70's and early 80's & benefitted from the experience."

Although Merton may not have influenced her, Levertov, like Seamus Heaney,¹⁰ was definitely inspired by Merton. Her haunting poem "I learned that her name was Proverb" was inspired by Merton's Proverb dreams; she records in the notes to *Breathing the Water* that one of her Spinoffs (poems inspired by photos and sentences taken out of context) was written after she'd read Michael Mott's biography of Merton:

"I learned that her name was Proverb" comes from the dream which Thomas Merton recounted in a letter to Boris Pasternak. . . . The letter which is alluded to by Mott is in the Thomas Merton Studies center at Bellarmine, Kentucky.¹¹

Another late poem, "On a Theme of Thomas Merton," she says was inspired "by one of Merton's tapes of informal lectures given at Gethsemani in the 1960s."¹²

Like Thomas Merton, Levertov paid strict attention to the movements of the soul, unafraid of the inner journey. In her early life she had practiced attention upon the world, on all that is beautiful, ephemeral and transcendent. In her last book, seemingly her testament, she offers us her religious poems, verse more attuned to the inner world; they are poems that "trace my own slow movement from agnosticism to Christian faith, a movement incorporating much doubt and questioning as well as affirmation."¹³

In an interview with Emily Archer at Ms. Levertov's home in Seattle in the summer of 1997, the poet discussed her spiritual life and growing attraction to the Catholic faith. She also offered her opinion of the various new translations of the Psalms, many of which she found "ghastly." She remarked,

I'm very conscious of the way in which the chanting of the Psalms is an important part of monastic life and becomes essential to people who experience that. During the ten days that I spent at a monastery in California, hearing the Psalms chanted twice a day was wonderful. But I have so far failed to establish a personal relationship with the Psalms and a regular reading of them. This (pulling a book from her shelves) is a very nice edition of Merton's *Bread in the Wilderness* (Merton's reflections of the Psalms).¹⁴

That Levertov would be reading Merton in the last months of her life seems fitting and

right for this modern pilgrim who had read “a fair amount of his prose” and “long intended to” read his poetry. Merton may not have influenced Levertov as a poet, but he certainly influenced her as a Christian who for a lifetime charted in her luminous verse “God’s elusive comings and goings in the manner of the Psalms.”¹⁵

In the end, however, it makes no difference which poet influenced whom, for we are all pilgrims inspired surely by a myriad of invisible and unheard presences. Just as Lady Julian reaches out to us from the fourteenth century, a “kindly light” to lead us on our spiritual journey, so too will Merton and Levertov reach out to future generations of pilgrims and offer them hope and inspiration so that like Brother Lawrence, whom Levertov also loved, they’ll not be afraid to “practice the presence of God” so that the poet’s words will apply not only to her subject but to the reader as well: “like a stone before the carver / you entered into yourself.”¹⁶

¹Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: *Selected Letters*, ed. David Cooper (New York: Norton, 1997) 178-179.

²Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 239.

³*Road to Joy* 43.

⁴Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 127.

⁵*Road to Joy* 361.

⁶Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 503.

⁷Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967) 142.

⁸Robert Waldron, *Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul: A Jungian Perspective* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1994).

⁹Thomas Merton, “Hagia Sophia,” in *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 367.

¹⁰In a letter to Henry Hart dated June 4, 1987, Heaney writes, “All of the great spiritual writers were constantly being applied, in digested, pre-packaged form, by preachers, at retreats, and were generally in the Catholic air I breathed at boarding school. I read, as an undergraduate, in a pious spirit, *Seeds of Contemplation* by Thomas Merton.” Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney, Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992) 34-35.

¹¹Denise Levertov, *Breathing the Water* (New York: New Directions, 1987) 85.

¹²Denise Levertov, *The Stream & the Sapphire* (New York: New Directions, 1997) 86.

¹³*The Stream & the Sapphire* viii.

¹⁴Emily Archer, “An Interview with Denise Levertov,” *Image, A Journal of the Arts & Religion* (Winter, 1997) 57.

¹⁵Archer 55.

¹⁶Denise Levertov, “The Conversion of Brother Lawrence,” in *The Stream & the Sapphire* 47.