

"Abundant, Multiple, Restless": Levertov and Merton in the 1960s

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Conversations Here and Now

"Denise Levertov was here today," and it was "a good visit together," Thomas Merton begins a letter dated December 10, 1967, exactly one year before his death.¹ Among other things, Levertov and Merton discussed "the merits of self-immolation as a way of protesting the war in Vietnam" that day while Ralph Eugene Meatyard took a series of photos collected in *Father Louie*.² Levertov's "good visit" was still on Merton's mind the next day: "Denise Levertov was here yesterday," he begins a letter to an inquiring student, and continues:

What poets do I like? . . . I do like Bill Williams but I find I don't read a great deal of him. Pound I respect and don't read. Duncan I like. Oppen I have quoted some. Creeley etc. ok. I wouldn't say any of these had influenced me. Denise Levertov I respond to very much as a poet and a person.³

While meetings between the two poets appear to be few, many places in their poems and prose meet and converse about a mutual concern

1. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 355.

2. Meatyard, Ralph Eugene, *Father Louie: Photographs of Thomas Merton*, ed. Barry Magid, with an essay by Guy Davenport (New York: Timken Publishers, 1991) 92-3.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 361.

for language and words, as both respond to the urgencies and crises of the sixties.

The following essay looks to some of the reasons Merton might have "responded very much" during the sixties to Denise Levertov, whose importance as an American poet of great spiritual depth and clarity has continued to grow. One can imagine the dialogues that might have continued between the two had Merton not died one year after that "good visit," especially conversations on poetry, prophecy, tradition, and political engagement. As poets and guardians of the word, both shared an abiding concern for the renewal of language in what Merton calls an age of destruction, and Levertov, an age of terror. Merton and Levertov's lives as artists moved both of them closer to the pulses of war and racial unrest in the sixties and, at the same time, to a keener critique of language, a surer understanding of the efficacy of poetry, and of the poet's necessary pre-position, "in the world."⁴

Even though he gets her book title wrong, Merton enthusiastically writes about Levertov in another letter:

One new poet I am very happy about is Denise Levertov. New Directions has done a book of hers, *With Eyes in the Backs of Their Heads*. I think it is very fine, very spiritual in a broad, Jungian sort of way. She is not Catholic as far as I know, or may be.⁵

Merton's letters suggest that he had been reading Levertov's work at least since the publication of *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* (1960), for in 1961 he advises Mark Van Doren that New Directions (publisher of all of his poetry) "has published a poet called Denise Levertov I think you would like. Have you seen her book? It starts with a wonderful version of a Toltec poem about what an artist ought to do . . .":⁶

*The artist: disciple, abundant, multiple, restless.
The true artist: capable, practicing, skillful;
maintains dialogue with his heart, meets things with his
mind.*⁷

4. The phrase is key to Levertov's aesthetic ethic, and comes from her first volume of collected essays, *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1973).

5. *The Road to Joy*, 239. The title is *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads*.

6. *Ibid.*, 43.

7. Denise Levertov, *Collected Earlier Poems, 1940–1960* (New York: New Directions, 1979) 84.

Merton and Levertov both responded to the political and social crises of the sixties with changes in their own ways of being artists, demonstrating their own multiplicity and restlessness, their unwillingness to subscribe to dogmas or roles, either aesthetic or religious, which would silence the necessary dialogue between poet and heart, poet and history.

Both poets struggled before the sixties with a dialectic Merton called "poetry and contemplation"⁸ and Levertov's work implicitly called "poetry and subjectivity." Merton's desire to reconcile what he once perceived to be mutually exclusive activities is the basis of his 1958 reappraisal of "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," an essay that originally appeared in *Commonweal* in 1948. During the sixties Merton begins living into his new sense that

true contemplation is inseparable from life and from the dynamism of life—which includes work, creation, production, fruitfulness, and above all love. Contemplation is not to be thought of as a separate department of life, cut off from all man's other interests and superseding them. It is the very fullness of a fully integrated life.⁹

Merton's exile in the early fifties from aesthetic reflection and the language of poetry was nearly over by the time he issued his praise of Levertov's work. No longer could he ignore his own "condition of being a poet" and of having to respond to the demand poetry and language were making on his vocation. Having to make a choice between the contemplative and the artistic life had clearly been a false dichotomy for Merton.

Psalms in the World

As Merton settled into the monastic life in the 1940s, Levertov was also occupied with her own decisive changes, both geographically and aesthetically: from England to New York, and from the influence of British neo-romanticism that prevails in *The Double Image* (1946) to the actualities of American culture, politics, and speech. Among her

8. See Merton's revision of these terms in "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981) 338–54.

9. Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation," 339.

influences are William Carlos Williams, H. D., Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan, all of whom rejected the well-wrought urns of formalist poetry for image-controlled, breath-driven "high energy constructs." But even before she left England, Levertov's restlessness with neo-romanticism and its subjectivity was clear. Written during a brief sojourn in Sicily in 1948, "Too Easy to Write of Miracles" contrasts the language of the "easy" lament—disembodied, self-circumscribed—with the language of the lived life. It is "Easy like the willow to lament, / rant in trampled roads where pools / are red with sorrowful fires," but

difficult to write
of the real image, real hand, the heart
of day or autumn beating steadily . . .
. . . and achieve
the unhaunted country of the final poem.¹⁰

Moving beyond the self as subject of the poem also meant moving from passive watching to active witnessing:

Some are too much at home in the role of wanderer,
watcher, listener; who, by lamplit doors
that open only to another's knock,
commune with shadows and are happier
with ghosts than living guests in a warm house. . . .¹¹

Being integrated, taking root in life—these are tasks for the poet whose relationship to the world speaks "I-Thou," whose art is not self-referential and appropriating, but dialogic and other-directed, a relation both Merton and Levertov believe is founded upon imagination and love.

By the early sixties, Levertov was articulating, in both poetry and prose, an aesthetic which was at once avant-garde and quite ancient. Her practice of "organic form" forges new relationships between form and content, even as it honors the origins of certain words and older practices of language. And "contemplation" is a key term in this recursive poetics. She echoes Merton in her description of contemplation as inseparable from creative dynamism, and especially from the creation of a poem. "The condition of being a poet," Levertov asserts in 1965, is a matter of fulfilling a demand that history and experience

10. Levertov, *Collected Earlier Poems*, 10.

11. *Ibid.*, 7.

awakens, and "the beginning of the fulfillment of this demand is to contemplate."¹² What Levertov means by contemplation is lodged within the origin of the word. "To contemplate," she says,

comes from "*templum*, temple, a place a space for observation, marked out by the augur." It means, not simply to observe, to regard, but to do these things in the presence of a god. And to meditate is "to keep the mind in a state of contemplation"; its synonym is "to muse," and to muse comes from a word meaning "to stand with open mouth"—not so comical if we think of "inspiration"—to breathe in.

So—as the poet stands openmouthed in the temple of life, contemplating his experience, there come to him the first words of the poem: the words which are to be his way in to the poem, if there is to be a poem.¹³

Like Merton, Levertov was challenged with tasks of integration. Bringing her "double images" into dialogue lay not entirely, but significantly, in her desire to write poems with a "line still taut"¹⁴ to the dancing Jewish Hasids and Christian mystics of her ancestry. From ghostly subjectivities to mysterious actualities—that is one way of describing Levertov's evolution toward becoming a "poet in the world," aided profoundly by the implicit "conversation" between Jew and Christian that has continued to shape her work. It is an ancient and ontological conversation, and concerned above all with language and presence. Merton mused in the letter above, whether Levertov "may be" Catholic. The spirituality he recognizes in Levertov's work in the early sixties is incipient and broad, indeed—catholic perhaps, but not yet Catholic.¹⁵ There is everywhere "the presence of a god" in Levertov's work, from the earliest poems to the most recent, but the turnings from "god" to "God" have been gradual. The air she breathed as a child was inescapably religious, filled with the cadences of Anglican liturgy and the characters of biblical and Hasidic legend. Levertov affirms her syncretic spiritual heritage in a number of poems,

12. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 8–9.

13. *Ibid.*, 8.

14. Levertov, "Illustrious Ancestors," *Collected Earlier Poems*, 77.

15. Even when she does "convert" to Catholicism, she remains, as Merton became, ecumenical in thought and practice. Levertov's comments on her movement "to a position of Christian belief" are found in "A Poet's View," *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992) 239–46.

foremost the well-known "Illustrious Ancestors," which tells how Rabbi Schneour Zalman, the legendary eighteenth century Hasidic "Rav of Northern White Russia" "'prayed / with the bench and the floor.' He used / what was at hand." "As did / Angel Jones of Mold," she continues, the Christian mystic-tailor "whose meditations / were sewn into coats and britches."¹⁶ In a later poem, as Levertov tells of her own parents' spiritual identity, she reveals much of her own:

As a devout Christian, my father
took delight and pride in being
(like Christ and the Apostles)
a Jew.

It was
Hasidic lore, his heritage,
he drew on to know
the Holy Spirit as Shekinah.

My Gentile mother, Welsh through and through,
and like my father, sustained
by deep faith, cherished
all her long life the words
of Israel Zangwill, who told her,
'You have a Jewish soul.'

I their daughter ('flesh of their flesh,
bone of their bone') . . .¹⁷

It can also be said that Denise Levertov, "bone of their bone," has "a Jewish soul," and a Hebraic way of being "in the world" alongside the Christian one. Furthermore, it is neither simply with the mystic in her maternal Welsh tradition nor with the Hasid in her paternal heritage that she keeps a "line still taut," but with earlier Christian mystics such as Julian of Norwich¹⁸ (whom Merton also came to love), and particularly with the ancient Hebrew psalmist. This line to the psalmist is cast in a number of different streams and depths throughout the decades of her poetry and her statements on poetics, but most importantly in her relationship to language.

16. Levertov, "Illustrious Ancestors," *Collected Earlier Poems*, 77.

17. Levertov, "Perhaps No Poem But All I Can Say and I Cannot Be Silent," *Oblique Prayers* (New York: New Directions, 1984) 35.

18. See "On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX" and "The Showings, 1-6" in Denise Levertov, *Breathing the Water* (New York: New Directions, 1987) 68, 75.

Levertov's poems return to Hebraic origins in their implicit practice of the word as *dabar*, or "word" in Hebrew, which concretely and immediately unites word and deed. Wilson Baroody explains that "biblical writers understand words as concrete, even physical objects in contrast to the typical modern, dualistic conception of them as having little or no physical reality."¹⁹ Walter Brueggemann, Susan Handelman, Isaac Rabinowitz, and Edith Wyschogrod, among others, explore the biblical texts in the original Hebrew and find that the apprehension of language embodied in *dabar* is fundamentally constitutive and efficacious. Its power is primarily relational, performative, and ethical.²⁰

Levertov's convictions about the constitutive and ethical nature of language begin with elements as small as the letters of the alphabet. In the worded world of the Hebrews, no part of language is insignificant. All letters, syllables, and words constitute the vast tissue of creation. And of the poem, Levertov says "I believe every space and comma is a living part of the poem and has its function, just as every muscle and pore of the body has its function."²¹ To use the title of one of her most important sequences, Levertov's whole poetic corpus can be seen as a vast "relearning the alphabet." And "the necessity" is foremost the redemption of words:

. . .
each part
of speech a spark
awaiting redemption, each
a virtue, a power . . .²²

In Levertov's aesthetic ethic, it is not just the poet who must take responsibility for words, but the teacher, the critic, and the reader, for

19. Wilson G. Baroody, "Biblical Mysticism: Hearing and Speaking God's Word," *Studia Mystica* 14:4 (1991) 9.

20. See Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982); Isaac Rabinowitz, "'Word' and Literature in Ancient Israel," *New Literary History*, vols. 3, 4 (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia, 1973) 118-39; and Edith Wyschogrod, "Works That 'Faith': The Grammar of Ethics in Judaism," *Cross Currents* 40.2 (Summer 1990) 176-93.

21. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 3.

22. Levertov, "The Necessity," *Poems 1960-1967* (New York: New Directions, 1983) 58.

"when words penetrate deep into us they change the chemistry of the soul, of the imagination. We have no right to do that to people if we don't share the consequences."²³ In the Hebrew language, the consequence of every utterance is folded into the very act of speaking. The effect of one word is simultaneous with its utterance; its power is immediate. In Hebrew experience "speech act" is a redundancy. Speech is act. In the utterance of the word—*dabar*—things happen.

Merton was also preoccupied in many of his writings with the spiritual efficacy of words, especially the contrast between the language of the Word, born in silence and charity, and what Augustine calls the "wrangling of tongues" that characterizes the language of Babel, words cursed with division and darkness.²⁴ The "political" speaker of Merton's poem "Tower of Babel" concedes that words are "the makers of our only reality,"²⁵ but that emptied of their "essential meaning," words have no connection with a vertical or spiritual dimension. They then become merely a

. . . means of locomotion
From backward to forward
Along an infinite horizontal plane . . .²⁶

"The most obvious characteristic of our age is destructiveness," Merton begins the essay "Theology of Creativity." No discussion of creativity "which is supposed, in the end, to be theological," he argues, will make sense unless we first examine how the word "creativity" itself has been severed from its origins and "essential meaning."²⁷

Merton's lament over our misuse of this word points to his fundamental and continual concern over the misuse of language, which for him, as for Levertov, has profound aesthetic, ethical, ontological, and theological implications. Merton believes, no less than Levertov, that words have constitutive power, but that it is "characteristic of our age" to destroy the covenant between word and truth, word and world. Words must be restored to their original connection and revered as a reality-making power, he insists. Instead of renewing con-

23. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 114.

24. Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1971) 159–60.

25. Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 22.

26. Levertov, *Collected Earlier Poems*, 22.

27. Merton, *Literary Essays*, 355.

versations with the Creator, current uses of the word "creativity" reduce it to cliché or caricature, or worse, a justification, he argues, for the "creation" of violent tools and art.²⁸ Only when such words are returned to the City of God will their healing power be restored. The Psalms belong to the City of God, explains Merton, where "there is only one language spoken . . . [and] that language is charity."²⁹

Levertov moves closer both to the world and to the "City of God" as she learns not only to lament authentically (not just "rant in trampled roads"), but to praise, with the power of words that seek their source in *caritas*. In his study of the "sociological question of the Psalms," Walter Brueggemann adopts a Jewish attitude toward language and identifies Israel's praise as "the duty and delight, the ultimate vocation of the human community; indeed of all creation. . . . Praise is not only a human requirement and a human need, it is also a human delight. We have a resilient hunger to move beyond self."³⁰ Brueggemann believes that praise is more than a response to God's power, even more than a risky alignment with the divine Other. Praise is "also *constitutive* of theological reality" and of the world in which it is spoken:

To be sure, praise is addressed to heaven. That is central to Barth and the tradition to which I refer. But it is equally true that praise is spoken by human voices on earth. The address to God indicates that praise is a theological act of profound dramatic importance. Praise is spoken on earth. Inevitably then, praise is not a pure, unmitigated impingement on heaven. The act also impinges on earth. That is, praise is not only a religious vocation, but it is also a social gesture that effects the shape and character of human life and human community.³¹

This argument for the efficacy of praise is congruent with the nature of the Hebrew word itself, the *dabar*. The word is a world-maker and the act of praise is a sacred doing, a *mitzvah*. To the Hebrew, the consequences of an utterance do not merely follow the act of speaking, but "are folded into it so that the speech act includes at least some consequences."³² The language of praise makes a radical claim for presence,

28. *Ibid.*, 355–56.

29. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, 160.

30. Brueggemann, 1.

31. *Ibid.*, 3.

32. Wyschogrod, 178.

and in doing so, is responsible "on earth" for its power. A psalm of praise, explains Brueggemann, "is not a response to a world already fixed and settled, but it is a responsive and obedient participation in a world yet to be decreed and in process of being decreed through this liturgical act."³³ Psalms are responses to the "multiple, restless" world by poets who are themselves "multiple, restless." The poet of praise is a poet decisively *in* the world. Merton echoes this understanding of the psalmist as a poet "in the world" and the Psalms as constitutive praise in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

The universe of the Old Testament is a praising universe, of which man is a living and essential part, standing shoulder to shoulder with the angelic hosts who praise Yahweh: and praise is the surest manifestation of true life. The characteristic of Sheol, the realm of the dead, is that there is no praise in it. The Psalms then are the purest expression of the essence of life in this universe: Yahweh is present to His people when the Psalms are sung with triumphant vigor and jubilation (not just muttered and meditated in the individual beard). This presence and communion, this *coming into being* in the act of praise, is the heart of Old Testament worship as it is also of monastic choral praise.³⁴

From *The Double Image* (1946) to *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970), Denise Levertov's earlier work is occupied with learning to be "a poet in the world" which, like the world of the ancient Hebrews, is far from being fixed or settled. Like Thomas Merton, Levertov reverences language as a living power and perceives no hiatus between thought and word, word and action. Language *is* enactment. In a 1968 interview, Levertov describes the effect of her political activities on her art: "I feel that it is poetry that led me into political action and not political action which has caused me to write poems more overtly engaged than those I used to write."³⁵ More than twenty years later, when asked to talk about the relationship of faith and art, she feels "a fraud . . . sitting down to write about faith that works!" and speaks instead of "Work

33. Brueggemann, 11.

34. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1966) 135.

35. Quoted in Kerry Driscoll, "A Sense of Unremitting Emergency: Politics in the Early Work of Denise Levertov," *Critical Essays on Denise Levertov*, ed., Linda Wagner-Martin (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1991) 148.

That Enfaiths."³⁶ Once again, language leads the way. When she began writing *Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus* (in *Candles in Babylon*), Levertov conceived it only "as an experiment in structure."³⁷ But by the time she had arrived at the *Agnus Dei*, I discovered myself to be in a different relationship to the material and to the liturgical form from that in which I had begun. The experience of writing the poem—that long swim through waters of unknown depth—had been also a conversion process, if you will.³⁸ The words of the *Mass* do not merely represent reality, they constitute a new reality. Levertov's poetic comes from a practice of language that is relational, revelatory, and performative—all hallmarks of the Hebraic attitude toward the word. Instead of a "hiatus between seeing and saying," the poet's reception and expression are synchronous, says Levertov: "The poet does not see and then begin to search for words . . . he begins to see and at once begins to say or to sing, and *only in the action of verbalization does he see further.*"³⁹

Levertov believes that it is the poet's task to take responsibility for this living power and the consequences of its work in the world. Poetry has "kinetic force": in both writing and reading the poem, something otherwise dormant or stagnant may be moved, may "come into play."⁴⁰ "Poetry *can* matter," Levertov's work implicitly answers Dana Gioia's recent question.⁴¹ Language has efficacy. It has alchemical force and dynamic consequences because it is more than the "dress" of thought. The convictions that poetry does matter and that language has efficacy lie at the heart of Levertov's aesthetic ethics, an ethics with which Merton was in accord.

36. Denise Levertov, *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992) 247.

37. *Ibid.*, 249.

38. *Ibid.*, 250.

39. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 73.

40. *Ibid.*, 6.

41. In a critique of the role of contemporary poetry in American culture, Gioia asks outright, "Can poetry matter?" In an article and later book by that name, Gioia explores "the decline of poetry's cultural importance" and its increasing confinement to a subculture which ironically "demeans its own art" through clubby committee work. Gioia believes poetry does matter, assenting with Pound that "If a nation's literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays," and lamenting with William Carlos Williams that "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there." See *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1992) 2–8, 20.

While it is the language of poetry and the act of writing the poem that leads (over years) to Levertov's "enfaithment," for several years Merton found language to be an impediment to the contemplative life, and was thus engaged in the early nineteen-fifties in working out his understanding of silence, even as he investigated the power of words. Merton's "Tower of Babel" (the longer morality play) was written, says David Cooper, "from the perspective of a man who still believed in the efficacy of separateness," the separateness of the earthly city and the heavenly city.⁴² If language belongs to the earthly city and silence to the heavenly city, one must question seriously the efficacy of poetry as an aid to the holy life. Merton's separation of the two cities undergirds his "Theory of Prayer":

Not in the streets, not in the white streets
Nor in the crowded porticoes
Shall we catch You in our words . . .⁴³

Language has power, but human beings have appropriated it as a tool for their own gain and destruction:

. . . the singers are suddenly killed,
Slain by the blades of their own song—
The words that clash like razors in the throat
Severing the tender strings.

For the things that we utter turn and betray us,
Writing the names of our sins on flesh and bone
In lights as hard as diamonds.⁴⁴

Before Merton reappraised poetry and contemplation, his God seemed to dwell not in a world noisy with human speech, but in "those soundless fathoms" of the "armed ocean of peace."⁴⁵ Not until Father Louis makes peace with poetry again in the late fifties will he begin to grieve for language in a way that brings him closer to the world. And then in his own way he finds, as Levertov did, that it was language that led him into political action and a more integrated social conscience, not vice versa. A maturing Merton witnesses the world at that pivotal turn

42. David Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989) 152.

43. Merton, *Collected Poems*, 179.

44. *Ibid.*, 179, 180.

45. *Ibid.*, 180, 179.

of decade with a new way of seeing: "This morning, before Prime, in the early morning sky, three antiquated monoplanes flew over the monastery with much noise, followed by a great heron."⁴⁶

Levertov's "A Letter to William Kinter of Muhlenberg," offers its gratitude to a "Zaddik" who taught her a way of seeing that contemplates and celebrates those sorts of redeemed juxtapositions:

From the bus, Zaddik,
going home to New York,

I saw a new world
for a while—it was

the gold light on a rocky slope,
the road-constructors talking to each other,

bear-brown of winter woods, and later
lights of New Jersey factories and the vast

December moon.⁴⁷

Like the Hasidim in her heritage, Levertov sees holiness and beauty in whatever is "at hand," making no sharp distinctions between "sacred" and "profane." The Hasidim teach that lodged within the most mundane are "sparks" of the divine, and the task of the human is to redeem those sparks.⁴⁸ In "Stepping Westward" the woman in pilgrimage recognizes the chiaroscuro of this "sense of wonder," the "shadow" that keeps that sense pure but not naive, an act of attention, not an indulgence in sentimentality. She is "glad to be"

. . . who, myself,
I am, a shadow
that grows longer as the sun
moves, drawn out

on a thread of wonder.⁴⁹

Shadows and burdens, life's necessary "evils" are transformed along the "thread of wonder," and "begin to be remembered / as gifts,

46. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 15.

47. Levertov, *Poems 1960-67*, 46-7.

48. See Ronald Younkins, "Denise Levertov and the Hasidic Tradition," *Descant* 19.1 (Fall 1974) 40-8. The "legend of the sparks" is central to Hasidic ethics.

49. Levertov, *Poems 1960-67*, 165-6.

goods." This is the language of a Hasidic commitment to transformation, of finding the sacred in the profane, and good in evil.

In 1974, Ronald Younkens "eulogizes" the Hasidic influence in Levertov's work as one of those aesthetic forces that declined in the 1960s "as new forces emerged."⁵⁰ Younkens believed that ultimately Levertov's Hasidic-like commitment to transformation became harder to maintain in the face of the "stubborn, insistent reality" of the later sixties and her preoccupation with "the burning flesh" of children in Vietnam. Along with several others, Younkens had praised the growth of Levertov's orphic consciousness in her earlier work and her transformative remembrance of burdens as "gifts, goods," but was dismayed by Levertov's later poetic confession in "Advent, 1966" that

There is a cataract filming over
my inner eyes. Or else a monstrous insect
has entered my head, and looks out from my sockets with multiple vision,

seeing not the unique Holy Infant
burning sublimely, an imagination of redemption,
furnace in which souls are wrought into new life,
but, as off a beltline, more, more senseless figures aflame.⁵¹

Yet unlike several critics, such as Alvin Rosenfeld,⁵² Younkens is not willing to pronounce the changes of that time as an aesthetic or ontological failure. He grants her, instead, a necessary restlessness, understanding that her

search for a proper understanding of the poet's role is not completed. In response to a rapidly changing world Levertov will very likely continue to examine and, if necessary, redefine her function and obligations within the community.⁵³

Younkens's understanding of Hasidism's "declining influence" is partial. While Levertov's poems are, in fact, barely visited by *zaddiks*, sparks, and excerpts from Buber's *Tales* after the late sixties, the spiritual

50. Ronald Younkens, "Denise Levertov and the Hasidic Tradition," *Descant* 19.1 (Fall 1974) 40.

51. Denise Levertov, *Poems 1968–1972* (New York: New Directions, 1987) 124.

52. See Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "'The Being of Language and the Language of Being': Heidegger and Modern Poetics," *Boundary 2* 4 (1976) 535–53.

53. Younkens, 47.

and ethical influence of Judaism is by no means lost, but rather absorbed into the larger motifs of her ethics and aesthetics, even into the design of her political engagement. When Hasidism's larger context—Hebraism—is considered, those so-called "tremendous changes" throughout the sixties fall much more congruently into what Levertov continues to believe about her own artistic temperament and habit of working.

A recognition of this larger spiritual ground also puts Levertov's apparently "tremendous changes" in the sixties and seventies into another perspective. Against the larger background of Hebraism, Levertov's decisive alternations of praise and lament resemble the pattern of the ancient Hebrew psalmist. In the Bible it is common to find a psalm of great lyrical beauty, tranquillity, and assurance juxtaposed without explanation or warning by one of nearly unrelieved lamentation, rage, abandonment, or petition for revenge. The celebration and wonder of Levertov's early poetry yields for a time to anger and near despair, as we see in poems from *The Sorrow Dance* (1967) well into *Footprints* (1972), which reveal a Jewish capacity for raw lamentation and rage as Levertov responds to the pressures of history.

Merton's engagement with Hebrew poetry extends beyond the reflections in *Bread in the Wilderness*, his first book about the Psalms, into his own psalming poetry, some of them his own renderings of the originals. "The Captives—a Psalm" brings the lamenting Psalm 137 into the twentieth century with the raw regret, revenge, and grief of the original voice still intact:

The children of God have died, O Babylon,
Of thy wild algebra. . . .

Our bodies are greyer than mud.
There, butterflies are born to be dancers
And fly in black and blue along the drunken river
Where, in the willow trees, Assyria lynched our song!

May my bones burn and ravens eat my flesh
If I forget thee, contemplation!
May language perish from my tongue
If I do not remember thee, O Sion, city of vision,
Whose heights have windows finer than the firmament⁵⁴

This poem represents the trend of most contemporary poetic "translations" of the Psalms. Rather than a scholarly concern for each word's

54. Merton, *Collected Poems*, 212.

archaeology, it employs what George Steiner calls in *After Babel* "understanding as translation," a realization of the "complete semantic event" of the original.⁵⁵ While not a translation in the technical sense, Merton's psalm is a trans-lation, in the etymological sense; it carries meaning across one century and culture to another.

Levertov's and Merton's participation, in their own ways, as poets of political protest is also characteristic of the ancient psalmist's commitment to *communitas*, to the tribe or cult. Theirs is a much older aesthetic than the one which asks, "Can a political poem be poetry?" That question, Levertov explains,

seems to me a wholly modern one. The Romantic image of the poet was above all one which emphasized his individuality—his difference from other people rather than the ways in which he resembled them; and this led to the elevation of the lyric mode as the type or exemplar of poetry, because it was the most *personal* mode. . . . The Romantic period accelerated the isolation of the poet from the community . . . by seeing the artist as endowed with a special sort of temperament which was not only operative during *the making* of works of art, not only when the poet donned the Bardic mantle, and was actually writing, but which made him at all times supersensitive.⁵⁶

It is in *the making* that the poet as poet is revealed, Levertov has always insisted, not in some sort of "Bohemian style of life." Merton also looks to the origin of *poet—poiein*, "to make, create"—to reappraise the dialogue between poet and contemplative:

To the true Christian poet, the whole world and all the incidents of life tend to be sacraments—signs of God, signs of His love working in the world. However, the mere fact of having this contemplative vision of God in the world around us does not necessarily make a man a great poet. One must be not a "seer" but also and especially a "creator"—a "maker."⁵⁷

The contemplation required to make a poem that will "sing being" to another does require a certain degree of solitude, Levertov insists, but

55. George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975) 7.

56. Denise Levertov, *Light Up the Cave* (New York: New Directions, 1981) 116–118.

57. Merton, *Literary Essays*, 345.

solitude is not to be confused with insulation. This is a solitude that leads one to, not away from, the Other, as she learned from Rilke: "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."⁵⁸ Levertov believes the Romantic era in English poetry bestowed an unfortunate focus on poetic *temperament* rather than poetic *working*:

It was an easy ego-trip. The public, predictably, began to think of [poets] as undependable fellows, at best whimsical and capricious, at worst, dangerous madmen, and in any case not responsible citizens. The madness of the poet, as seen by the bourgeois, is not the divine madness of the shaman poets of ancient or primitive societies, but a quotidian foolishness and tendency to exaggerate, not worthy to be taken seriously.⁵⁹

The psalmist provides the counter-model in a return to the earliest, most "essential meaning" of *poet*: responsible to the community, focused on the making, the creating, the working. In the original language of the Psalms "the terms for 'meditation' (*higgayôn, sîhâ, hagîg*) are focused on the process of poetic composition itself."⁶⁰ In contrast to its usual Christian-Hellenic associations with silence, stillness, and withdrawal, Hebraic "meditation" and poetry take place dynamically, in time, aware of history and also reflexively aware of their own processes. To claim David and Asaph as prototypes of the Romantic poet is simply not defensible. In Harold Fisch's view, the Psalms' apparent subjectivity is actually quite limited, for they are "insistently" dialogic:

the encounter between the "I" and the "Thou" is the signal for a change not merely in the inner realms of consciousness but in the

58. Levertov, *Light Up the Cave*, 286. Levertov is not blind to Rilke's failure in this regard. She continues parenthetically: "(Rilke himself, of course, shunned the many in practice, and can scarcely be claimed as democratic in theory either; yet there are letters of his written in the revolutionary Munich of 1918 which show him to have been too open-hearted, apolitical and aristocratic though he was, to have been altogether irresponsible to that stir of new possibility, even if he soon became disillusioned with it.)"

59. *Ibid.*, 117.

60. Harold Fisch, "Psalms: The Limits of Subjectivity," *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) 107–8.

realm of outer events. . . . we are emphatically in the realm of political and historical experience. . . . for the God who meets us in the interior drama of the soul is the same God who acts mightily in history.⁶¹

"My own probably unattainable goal," Levertov writes, as poet and political dissident in 1975, "is to attain to such osmosis of the personal and the public, of assertion and of song, that no one would be able to divide our poems into categories. The didactic would be lyrical, the lyrical would be didactic."⁶² These are the words of a contemporary psalmist and pilgrim who dwells richly in the inner zone, but does not remain there, who is not afraid to sing the hard songs of history.

By the mid-sixties, Merton was also sure that the new heaven and earth would be characterized by multiplicity and admixtures of the kind to which Levertov aspires, not separate cities dividing earth from heaven, poetry from contemplation: "Eschatology is not an invitation to escape into a private heaven: it is a call to transfigure the evil and stricken world."⁶³ What is called for, Merton believes, are meaningful acts of language, "raids on the unspeakable," words uttered and grounded in Christian hope "where every other hope stands frozen stiff before the face of the Unspeakable," which he defines in terms of language and absence:

It is the void we encounter, you and I, underlying the announced programs, the good intentions, the unexampled and universal aspirations for the best of all possible worlds. It is the void that contradicts everything that is spoken even before the words are said; the void that gets into the language of public and official declarations at the very moment when they are pronounced, and makes them ring dead with the hollowness of the abyss.⁶⁴

Heidegger answers the question "What are poets for in a destitute time?" in part by describing the shepherd-poet who both endures and reaches into that abyss carved by absence:

61. Ibid., 108–110.

62. Levertov, *Light Up the Cave*, 128.

63. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 5.

64. Ibid., 4.

In the age of the world's night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured. But for this it is necessary that there be those who reach into the abyss. . . . Mortals, when we think of their nature, remain closer to that absence because they are touched by presence. . . .⁶⁵

The poet's task is to attend to what the abyss "remarks," that is, a fugitive presence that leaves traces that the poet must follow.⁶⁶ Thus, "to be a poet in a destitute time means," Heidegger says, "to attend, *singing*, to the trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world's night utters the holy."⁶⁷

Heidegger's psalmic image of the poet as a singing "shepherd of being" is closely related to Denise Levertov's own sense of the poet's task and its musical relation:

The *being* of things has inscape, has melody, which the poet picks up as one voice picks up, and sings, a song from another, and transmits, transposes it, into tones others can hear. And in *his doing* so lies the inscape and melody of the poet's *own* being.⁶⁸

In Levertov's aesthetic ethic, the music of inscape is never sung to oneself, for oneself. She is impatient with much "confessional" poetry and its "miasmatic subjectivities."⁶⁹ She agrees with Cid Corman that poetry gives us "not experience thrown as a personal problem on others but experience as an order that will sing to others."⁷⁰ Levertov's poems preserve the psalmic tradition of moving fluidly between person and community, idiolect and dialect. The I-we explorations of a Levertov poem speak of witness, not confession.

The Psalms illustrate the difference, observes Kathleen Norris in *The Cloister Walk*, "between what the poet Galway Kinnell has termed the 'merely personal,' or individual, and the 'truly personal,' which is individual experience reflected back into community and tradition."⁷¹ It is one of the paradoxes of the psalms to be both "an indi-

65. Martin Heidegger, "What are Poets For?" *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 92–3.

66. Ibid., 94.

67. Ibid. Emphasis mine.

68. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 17.

69. Ibid., 46.

70. Ibid., 47.

71. Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996)

vidual cry and a collective affirmation, a spontaneous overflow of feeling and a formula speaking to us of what we have always known."⁷² This movement from 'I' to 'we' was familiar to the ancient Hebrew, whose understanding of 'individual' and 'self' is largely alien to contemporary American culture. In her experience as an oblate in a Dakotan Benedictine monastery, Norris finds that "praying the psalms is often disconcerting for contemporary people who encounter Benedictine life: raised in a culture that idolizes individual experience, they find it difficult to recite a lament when they're in a good mood, or to sing a hymn of praise when they're in pain."⁷³ The Benedictines preserve the Jewishness of the psalms, sung daily in a communal setting, Norris continues, "restoring to our mouths words that have been snatched from our tongues and relegated to the page, words that have been privatized and effectively silenced. It counters our tendency to see individual experience as sufficient for formulating a vision of the world."⁷⁴ Merton observes the communal nature of the Psalms when he stresses "the importance of the Choral recitation of the Divine Office": "We all differ, we all have our own problems and troubles, and yet we all sing together: 'Hear my cry, hearken to my prayer . . .' The very syntax makes us one."⁷⁵

On the other hand, Levertov argues, the other extreme is also problematic, and a poem which has ignored the inner experience in favor of documentation and political polemics will be similarly poor: "The dangerous contrasting assumption by partisan poets and their constituencies [is] that the subject matter carries so strong an emotive charge in itself" that intrinsic beauty and music is rendered unnecessary. A political poetry which is truly poetry will remember its "roots in song, magic, and the high craft that makes itself felt as exhilarating beauty even when the content voices rage or utters a grim warning."⁷⁶

Whether Levertov herself is always able to embody such an aesthetic in her politically engaged poetry is matter for much critical comment. Her few "unmusical" or quasi-lyrical lamentations of the sixties drew much criticism and shaped (practically divided) critical attention to her work from then on. But the raw lamentation of "Advent 1966"

72. Fisch, 118.

73. Norris, 101.

74. *Ibid.*, 100.75. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, 119.76. Levertov, *Light Up the Cave*, 126.

is clearly a distant relative to Psalm 79, Psalm 88, and Psalm 137 in its anguish, its alienation from the spiritual homeland, its reflexive awareness of poetic "failure": "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Ps. 137:4). Yet, like the psalmist's, Levertov's lamentations are, in fact, shaped by a commitment to transformation, one that must be forged both in the darkest halls of inner being and the cruelest cells of history.

Younkins's understanding of history and poetry is apparently not Jewish enough when he concludes that "a preoccupation with social and political struggle has made transformation impossible" in Levertov's war-era poetry. Levertov keeps a line taut with her Hebraic ancestors precisely *because* she remains in the dark waiting room Advent is meant to be, "seeing *not* the unique Holy Infant / burning sublimely, an imagination of redemption" (emphasis mine). She resembles her Jewish ancestors in attending to the raw facts of history without grasping prematurely for messianic transformation. "There is a cataract filming over / my inner eyes," she psalmically confessed, knowing that the very utterance of that *dabar* in itself stirred some change in both person and history, and that "the poem has a social effect of some kind whether or not the poet wills that it have."⁷⁷ The poet of "Advent 1966" resembles the psalmist in a shared capacity to rage and lament for God's apparent absence and abandonment. A monstrous many-eyed insect shapes sight where transformative divine vision should be.

There is no evidence that Denise Levertov has ever consciously worked to make "redemption" an agenda or force in her art. Rather, "inner colloquy" is what she believes necessary: "what the poet is called on to clarify is not answers but the existence and nature of questions; and his likelihood of so clarifying them for others is made possible only through dialogue with himself."⁷⁸ "The true artist / maintains dialogue with his heart" and in so doing, fulfills the task of the poet articulated by Ibsen: "to make clear to himself, and thereby to others, the temporal and eternal questions. . . ."⁷⁹ Taken out of context, Merton's words in 1958 seem to point to the same aesthetic conviction, that the poet's "necessity" involves an outering or uttering of inner conversation or contemplation:

77. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 6.78. *Ibid.*, 45.79. *Ibid.*, 44.

If the intuition of the poet naturally leads him into the inner sanctuary of his soul, it is for a special purpose in the natural order: when the poet enters into himself, it is in order to reflect upon his inspiration and to clothe it with a special and splendid form and then return to *display it to those outside*.⁸⁰

But Merton reveals right away that this is a "danger" for one who also seeks to "lose himself in the mystery and secrecy and infinite, transcendent reality of God."⁸¹ The only way to reconcile the artist and mystic, Merton concludes, is not "the application of some abstract, *a priori* principle, but purely by a practically practical appeal to the will of God"; one who is called to be a poet (a "Christian" poet, for Merton) will be engaged in both "contemplation" and "declaration."⁸² It is in this final point that Merton and Levertov meet; although their paths of arrival are quite different.

In 1964 Levertov admonishes the editors of *things* magazine:

Therefore if our poetry is to seek truth—and it must, for that is a condition of its viability, breath to its lungs—then it cannot confine itself to what you, the editors of *things*, in your prospectus, have called direct statement, but must allow for all the dazzle, shadow, bafflement, leaps of conjecture, prayers, and dream-substance of that quest. . . . We need a poetry not of *direct statement* but of *direct evocation*: a poetry of hieroglyphics, of embodiment, incarnation. . . .⁸³

At the root of the word *statement* is *stand*; at the root of *evocation* is a *calling forth* or *out*. From one comes *statue*, from the other a summons to waking, hearing, looking, seeking. Levertov's poetics reject statuary in favor of the contours of the fluid word—what is called out can leap, dazzle, and baffle. What is evoked is called forth, suggesting the presence of something that has lain hidden or sleeping,

what's not found
at once, but lies

within something of another nature,
in repose, distinct.
Gull feathers of glass . . .⁸⁴

80. Merton, *Literary Essays*, 350.

81. *Ibid.*

82. *Ibid.*, 353–4.

83. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 58, 61.

84. Levertov, "Pleasures," *Collected Earlier Poems*, 90.

Levertov's grammar of presence closely matches what Owen Barfield observes of Hebrew language and theology: like the psalmist, she insists on the creative, creating reality of what lies *within*:

. . . idolatry is the effective tendency to abstract the sense-content from the whole representation and seek that for its own sake, transmuting the admired image into a desired object. . . . The idols, their Psalmist insisted, were not filled with anything. They were mere hollow pretences of life. They had no "within."⁸⁵

The commandment to not "make for yourself an idol" is not simply an injunction against polytheism on the part of a jealous Jahweh. It has everything to do with language, warning against the comfort of worshipping a name that will stand still with the certainty and authority of *statement*. It is quite a different matter to follow a God whose name declares no such certainty. I AM WHO I AM is a God of Being-in-Becoming whose grammar is so infinite that it allows any "skidding of meaning," any elusive showing of presence, any action in history. The Hebraic divine name is neither purely noun or verb, but a mysterious, dynamic union of both.

Like the psalmist, Denise Levertov expresses no desire to be original, rather to be "originary," to reach back in acts of naming to words which still bear some imprint of that dynamic union. Her practice of language is etymological. "Etymology" comes from the Greek *etumos*, which means the "truest sense." The poet, says Levertov, rejects the "merely cosmetic" in the process of writing the poem with words which reveal the truest sense, "in favor of the attempt to reach back and down to the origins of each image."⁸⁶ Merton also demonstrates this "etymological" poetic. When the exiles in Merton's morality play "Tower of Babel" long for work, freedom, and peace, the answer lies in a renewal of words, a re-formation of language that depends upon a will to "relearn the alphabet" in the truest sense. Through Christ's mercy, proclaims the prophet of Merton's poem, "All our words become true":

THE ANCIENT: Ah, yes, I have heard in the past that words could be true.

RAPHAEL: They are meant to bind minds together in the joy of truth.

85. Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1965) 110.

86. Levertov, *New and Selected Essays*, 241.

THOMAS: You must discover new words reborn out of an old time
Like seeds from an old harvest.⁸⁷

Merton and Levertov grow as “poets in the world” as they turn their attention to history and their compassion to the Other, a “conversion” or turning parallel with a growing attention to the history of words, the otherness of language, and a vocation as guardians of that living power. Thus, the truth-value of words lies largely in re-membering and caring for the bodies of words no less than for the body politic.

Besides being reverent acts of etymology, Levertov’s poems are acts of *midrash*, imaginative interpretations of what her attention to the world’s text yields. She composes *midrash*-poems, “not desiring apocrypha / but true revelation,” as her Jewish ancestors might say.⁸⁸ A midrashic relationship with language is a matter not of rounding off, but opening out:

Midrash, like the white fire of revelation, is indeed the negative space “formed” by the shapes of the letters we write in our effort to know God’s will. The identity of the pieces says each of us contains all the elements, and it is always a matter of turbulent, though delicate balance. The detachable element suggests a dynamic, not fixed relationship between all the parts.⁸⁹

Notes of a scale, threads, tesserae—are images Levertov uses for the openness and incompletions of the pilgrim way. While each implies the potential of something whole and complete—the melody, the weaving, the mosaic—the task at hand for Levertov is much like the “idea” E. M. Forster says “the novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off, but opening out.”⁹⁰ Not answers; questions. Not a major (or even minor) scale whose leading tones seek resolution, but a whole tone scale whose harmonics can lead anywhere, whose direction is penultimate itself. Merton recognizes this same principle of midrashic incompleteness both in the Psalms and in Gregorian chant,

87. Merton, *Collected Poems*, 266.

88. Levertov, “At the Edge,” *Collected Earlier Poems*, 115.

89. Milgrom, Jo. “At the Altar of Decision: A Workshop in Handmade Midrash,” *Parabola* 18:3 (August 1993) 90.

90. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1927) 169.

and such an insight looks forward to developments both in his poetry and in Levertov’s developing aesthetic:

The beauty of God is best praised by the men who *reach and realize their limit* knowing that their praise cannot attain to God. It is then that the inarticulate, long *jubilus* takes over in Gregorian chant: some of the extended melismatic developments of the alleluia in the Easter Liturgy, particularly those of the seventh tone. Gregorian chant has a special grace for bringing out this experience of praise that reaches its limit, fails, and yet continues in a new dimension.⁹¹

“Nothing in [the Baal-Shem] is eschatological, nothing in him presses the claim to be something final, conclusive,” says Martin Buber of Hasidism’s legendary founder; therefore “his hour is not the hour of redemption, but of a renewal . . . he only seeks to help the redemption, to prepare for it.”⁹² The poet’s necessity is to take words back to their origins, where their light and salt can be restored:

From love one takes
petal to rock and blessed
away towards
descend

for love and
or if in fear knowing
the risk, knowing
what one is touching, one does it⁹³

The poet doesn’t *accomplish* the redemption of language, suggests Levertov. She cares for the divinity and the ethical power of each word. The language of illusion (*pace* idolatry) is a language which has stopped living in unknowing, has stopped the difficult but necessary “awaiting” and has instead forged its own solutions and finalities.

The Psalms represent the kind of music and language Merton prescribes for an age of destruction: “They are the songs of God in this world. Singing them, we become more fully incorporated into the mystery of God’s action in human history.”⁹⁴ Likewise, the kind of

91. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 136, 137.

92. Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Horizon Press, 1960) 39–40.

93. Levertov, *Poems 1960–67*, 58.

94. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, 59.

"singing" to which a Levertov poem aspires is neither background music nor aesthetic decoration. It is a regard for a fundamental, cosmic *melos*, a counter to the "ill wind" we breathe, "a beating of gongs, efficacious / to drive away devils."⁹⁵ It is a power of the most primitive kind of strength and efficacy because it comes from a particular relationship with language itself:

The poet's task is to hold in trust the knowledge that language, as Robert Duncan has declared, is not a set of counters to be manipulated, but a Power. And only in this knowledge does he arrive at music, at that quality of song within speech which is not the result of manipulations of euphonious parts but of an attention.⁹⁶

Journeys to the Fire's Core

Levertov's "During the Eichmann Trial" takes us into the moral heart of one of the worst crimes of modern history and to the heart of Merton's and Levertov's critique of language. With this poem "the abyss has opened" and Levertov begins to proceed from many of the same common presuppositions as the Hasidim. In Buber's articulation of it,

. . . it is not for any man to live any longer as though evil did not exist. One cannot serve God merely by avoiding evil; one must engage oneself with it . . . The sparks of God's light, in their deepest exile that we call evil, yearn for liberation. . . Their appearance signifies an appearance of God in the things that are seemingly farthest from Him.⁹⁷

Levertov's poem's grammar of ethics begins with an epigraph by Robert Duncan: "When we look up each from his being . . ." Levertov's three-part poem then "completes" Duncan's clause, not with a solution, but with the troubling question, "**Here is a mystery, / a person, an / other, an I?**"⁹⁸ Adolf Eichmann stands before the poet and the world

isolate in a bulletproof
witness-stand of glass,

95. *Ibid.*, 33.

96. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 54.

97. Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, 53–4.

98. Levertov, *Poems 1960–67*, 63.

a cage where we may view
ourselves, an apparition

telling us something he
does not know: we are members

one of another.⁹⁹

The world of which Eichmann is part fails to see or hear the Other, and can hold no true conversation, only monologues. The "Unspeakable" has infected both language and relation. L. S. Dembo explores the contrasts between the monological and dialogical life and finds his model for the dialogical Jew, not surprisingly, in Martin Buber, who "sees the Other as an intimate, takes communality as the ideal for human behavior."¹⁰⁰ Dembo finds the "monological" opposite in those who live in an "atomized totality . . . as Sartre depicted it in his pre-Marxist days":

Whether Jew or gentile, the monologist lives in the I-It relation . . . [and] renouncing monotheism, finds himself in a state approaching "nausea" as he beholds the randomness or gratuity into which things and language have fallen. . . hearing only his own voice, each finds not the meaning for all carried by Logos but only the private meaning he determines for himself. Committed only to words and performance or manipulation, not to communication, the Monological Jew is an exile in all facets of his life—a self-absorbed loner compelled to endure *distance from*, never *relation to*, others. That is to say, he inhabits not only a literal Diaspora but a psychological and moral one as well.¹⁰¹

Dembo then suggests that a relation between monologism and idolatry has an aesthetic counterpart:

That the Mosaic injunction against graven images could in any way be relevant to life in this secular age seems most improbable, unless, that is, there is such a thing as aesthetic idolatry, the idolatry

99. *Ibid.*, 65.

100. L. S. Dembo, *The Monological Jew: A Literary Study* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988) 5.

101. *Ibid.*, 5–6. Dembo's own note to this comment tells us he is "paraphrasing the Heraclitean fragment well-known to readers of both Buber and T. S. Eliot: 'Although the Word is common to all, most men act as if each had a private vision of his own'" (175).

inherent in image-making and in the praise of objects or persons that we find in certain kinds of poetry.¹⁰²

In contrast, a dialogical poetry will enact the "I-Thou" relation in the belief that "language is a thoroughly social phenomenon" and the "use" of language therefore "involves one's coming to an understanding with others about situations, not just naming objects."¹⁰³

Adolf Eichmann's crime was at its foundation a profound failure of the imagination, a failure to "look up from his being" and recognize the being of another. "Every man must know 'I am one of countless shards of clay'"—that is the problematic knowledge required; yet it is the knowledge Eichmann lacks. "We are members / one of another" has no meaning for him. Levertov's poem bears the insistent message of Hasidism and of her aesthetic ethic—Everyman means precisely Every Man. No one is beyond the reach of the original "holy sparks." At the same time, no one is exempt from making the inner response to other beings that translates, with outward care, into *caritas*.

The Eichmann trial also provoked a response from Thomas Merton, in the form of "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann," an ironic essay in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (1966). The "Author's Advice to His Book" declares, "*Raids*, I think I love you more than the rest," in part because "You have considered the critical challenge of the hour, that of dehumanization, and have dealt with it as you could, with poetry and irony rather than tragic declamation or confessional formulas."¹⁰⁴ Levertov engages the crisis with poetry, Merton with irony, but neither with declamations or confessionals. For Levertov, the crux of the problem is a matter of language and relation, a failure of the dialogical imagination. Merton's concern for language is similar to that in "Theology of Creativity." Here, he explores the semantic dissolution of the word *sane*: "One of the most disturbing facts that came out in the Eichmann trial was that a psychiatrist examined him and pronounced him *perfectly sane*."¹⁰⁵

102. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

103. *Ibid.*, 28–9. Dembo makes a useful connection here with M. M. Bakhtin's theory in *The Dialogical Imagination*.

104. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 2–3.

105. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 45.

David Cooper points to Merton's extensive reading and interest in Erich Fromm's theories of social pathology as the foundation of the Eichmann essay and its critique of *sanity*.¹⁰⁶ But language abuse is deeply embedded in dehumanization and social pathology, so the essay is also about "word sickness," the severance of *sane* from its roots in a healthy, Christian humanism. *Sane* is a word whose origin—Latin *sanus*—means "whole," "healthy." Where language has decayed and become merely representational or instrumental, terms of excess and absolutism abound: "*perfectly sane*," "*totally sane*," "*too sane*." Merton's humanizing corrective brings back the language of indirections, doubt, and penultimacy as he speaks for the future of "modern man": "If he were a little less sane, a little more doubtful, a little more aware of his absurdities and contradictions, perhaps there might be a possibility of his survival."¹⁰⁷ And the truest conversations with God are not perfectly uttered and pure, but may be, in Denise Levertov's words, "oblique prayers."

The need for the poet to be a "custodian" of language in the absurd and contradictory world gained even sharper focus in the poems of Levertov's *The Sorrow Dance* (1967). In the earlier sixties, Levertov firmly set the foundation for the poet's task, exploring the contours of the self, its limits and its powers in service to the poem, its need to make clear the "questions," not to propose answers or solutions. Now at the threshold of new crises in the world's body, Levertov responds with images of the body's knowledge. What we know by "looking up" from our being also has a personal dimension. It is quite natural that Levertov, a poet grounded in the processes of perception, would turn to the body, the very ground of perception. While this body-knowledge and its relationship to language flowers fully in the seventies and early eighties, one can find its beginnings in *O Taste and See* (1964) and *The Sorrow Dance*. Denise Levertov's "originary" relationship with language not only takes her back to the body, where words are grounded in their physical production, sound, and duration; it also leads her to the body of words, to their own beginnings and transformations.

Many of Levertov's poems during these years lament the misuse, erosion, or silencing of language. In exchange for the creative *dabar* are "Those groans men use / passing a woman on the street . . ."

106. David Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989) 244–5.

107. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 49.

It's a word

in grief-language, nothing to do with
primitive, not an ur-language;
language stricken, sickened, cast down . . .¹⁰⁸

Where once the world disclosed itself, a readable, singable text, it is now "filling up fast with / unintelligible / signs . . ." ¹⁰⁹ Trying to continue the "lived life" in such a world seems nearly impossible. The soul "dwindles sometimes to an ant / rapid upon a cracked surface," or is swallowed up in a numbing grief that prevents the word from creating the necessary knowing:

Biafra, Biafra, Biafra.
Hammering the word against my breast:
trying to make room for more knowledge
in my bonemarrow:
And all I see
is coarse faces grinning, painted by Bosch
on TV screen as Humphrey
gets nominated . . .¹¹⁰

Language appears to have become a "series of counters to be manipulated," a system of random squeaks and grunts emptied of meaning save its immediate appropriation. Levertov observes that words unmoored from their sacred origin and power can be made to mean anything. It happens in the seemingly innocent exchanges of children:

Do you want some gum?
'Yes!' 'Well yes means no,
so you can't have any.'

But "Yes" also "means no" in the language of military logic:

"It became necessary
to destroy the town to save it,"
a United States major said today.
He was talking about the decision
by allied commanders to bomb and shell the town
regardless of civilian casualties
to rout the Vietcong' . . .¹¹¹

108. Levertov, "The Mutes," *Poems 1960-67*, 196.

109. *Ibid.*, 198.

110. Levertov, "Biafra," *Poems 1968-72*, 16.

Levertov is certainly one of those poets to whom Merton could be referring when he argues that "poets are perhaps the ones who, at the present moment, are most sensitive to the sickness of language."¹¹² In his essay "War and the Crisis of Language," Merton recognizes that rampant "word sickness" infects not only military, but also religious establishments. His experiments with "anti-poetry" and his reflections about language naturally lead him to "observe that religion too has reacted to the same spastic upheaval of language" and curiously enough, he says, in a "revival of *glossolalia*—'speaking in tongues'":¹¹³

. . . there is here a significant implication that ordinary language is not good enough, and that there is something else which is at once more real and less comprehensible. Has ordinary language somehow failed? . . . He who speaks in an unknown tongue can safely speak without fear of contradiction. His utterance is definitive in the sense that it forecloses all dialogue.¹¹⁴

Both Levertov and Merton are acutely aware of the rise of a tongue which "forecloses all dialogue," which gnostically secures meaning for the few who know the shibboleth. The "word sickness"¹¹⁵ of the late sixties is, in effect, a rampant monology. There is an "utter finality" to monological speech that is totally alien to the poet's relationship with language, especially to a poet whose Hebraic ancestry assumed that the word is constantly, unendingly, in conversation. Merton uses precisely the same example as Levertov of military *glossolalia* and monologism: the words of the major who shelled the South Vietnamese town of Bentre, reducing "bombing" and "saving" to synonyms:

111. *Ibid.*, 20-1.

112. Merton, "War and the Crisis of Language," *The Critique of War: Contemporary Philosophical Explorations*, ed. Robert Ginsberg (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1969) 99.

113. *Ibid.*, 101.

114. *Ibid.*, 102-3.

115. *Ibid.*, 99. Merton explains the origin of the term "word sickness": "Long before George Steiner pointed out that the German language was one of the casualties of nazism and World War II, Brice Parain in France had studied the 'word sickness' of 1940, the moral illness of journales and political prose that accompanied the collapse of France. In proportion as the country itself accepted the denatured prose of Vichy—in which peace meant aggression and liberty meant oppression—it lost its identity and its capacity for valid action. It succumbed to 'a full armed language without practical application.' This, Parain reflected, had al-

declares that, "uttered," those unhealed vowels are "transformed in utterance / to song."¹²⁶

The very first line of "Relearning the Alphabet" recalls the journey back to the origin of "joy" in the sequence "Joy" from *The Sorrow Dance*:

A

Joy—a beginning. Anguish, ardor.
To relearn the ah! of knowing in unthinking
joy . . .¹²⁷

"Ah!" is that echoic "iu" she discovered earlier as "joy's" origin. In the semantic scheme suggested by Levertov's "organic" acrostic, "ah!" mingles "joy" and "anguish" and purifies them by fire through "ardor," a word for passion which itself suggests fire. The poem takes "joy" itself, a word with a history in both her text and in a larger context, as "a beginning." "A" beginning, not "the" beginning—the indefinite article is given enormous semantic weight as the first word of the letter—A—in question. That indefiniteness is consonant with the spirit of *midrash*, to which so much of Levertov's aesthetic belongs. There is no definite beginning of the alphabet any more than there is a finality of the Word. The Hebraic encounter with the Text/text is everlastingly indeterminate. In "Relearning the Alphabet" we have an apt enactment of Levertov's midrashic poetic. Unlike the monologies she has been lamenting, these utterances declare nothing final; their destination is the "fire's core," an image Paul Lacey calls Levertov's "signature for the contrarities of joy."¹²⁸ The word *is* the pilgrim path:

All utterance
takes me step by hesitant step towards
T
—yes, to continuance: into
that life beyond the dead-end where
. . . . I was lost.¹²⁹

126. *Ibid.*, 91.

127. Levertov, *Poems 1968–72*, 90.

128. Paul Lacey, "A Poetry of Exploration," *The Inner War: Forms and Themes in Recent American Poetry* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972) 130.

129. Levertov, *Poems 1968–72*, 98.

Being "lost," in this poem, is the opposite of being in pilgrimage. The condition of being lost is the result of nurturing "something in me that wants to cling / to *never*" and other absolutes, of a "looking for" instead of a "looking up," of seeking solutions instead of living in questions:

Lost in the alphabet
I was looking for
the word I can't now say
(love)
and am called forth
unto the twelfth letter
by the love in a question.¹³⁰

This poem is less a matter of calling upon the alphabet than of being "called forth" by the letters themselves, of being summoned by language to the mysterious inscape of *caritas*:

The forest is holy.
The sacred paths are of stone.
A clearing.
The altars are shifting deposits of pineneedles,
hidden waters,
streets of choirwood,
not what the will
thinks to construct for its testimonies.¹³¹

The construction of "testimonies" involves a way of seeing alien to the pilgrim poet who sees the world "only as / looked-up-into out of earth," and whose way of traveling is open to the leading of imagination:

V
Vision sets out
journeying somewhere,
walking the dreamwaters:
arrives
not on the far shore but upriver,
a place not evoked, discovered.¹³²

The poet's journey to the "fire's core" has transformed utterance from the dead-level speech of monologue to dialogue and trust in the

130. *Ibid.*, 94.

131. *Ibid.*, 99.

132. *Ibid.*, 99–100.

power of the Other, inseparable with in-sight and with the power of language:

S

. . . .
The door I flung my weight against
was constructed to open out
towards me.

In-seeing
to candleflame's
blue ice-cavern, measureless,

may not be forced by sharp
desire. . . .¹³³

On the eve of her most intense revolutionary activity, the "anguish" and "ardor" of political protest, Levertov learns, paradoxically, that "Transmutation is not under the will's rule." To put it in terms of a holy grammar, relearning the alphabet is a matter of dwelling in prepositions, not in the objects of transitive verbs that the will designs or dictates:

Y

Vision will not be used.
Yearning will not be used.
Wisdom will not be used.
Only the vain will
strives to use and be used,
comes not to fire's core
but cinder.¹³⁴

The "vain" will attempts to call forth "presence" only to name it and secure it. But the poet whose path is language finds that "Absence has not become/a presence." By the time the poet reaches 'Z', the blaze from the fire's core

addresses
a different darkness:
absence has not become

133. Ibid., 97.

134. Ibid., 100.

the transformed presence the will
looked for,
but other: the present,

that which was poised already in the ah! of praise.¹³⁵

The sounds with which Levertov ends her "organic" acrostic bring A and Z, *aleph* and *tav*, Alpha and Omega, full circle. But it is not a closed circle; it is more akin to the "clearing" in the holy forest, full of "shifting pineneedles." To re-learn the alphabet at this stage of pilgrimage does not mean to establish the letters, by magic or by faith. The conversation depends instead on the discovery, by indirections, of the *present* that lies hidden and poised within elusive *presence*.

Merton urges the reader of *Raids on the Unspeakable* to consider "the critical challenge of the hour" in large part as a crisis of words. Levertov takes up such a challenge in "Relearning the Alphabet" by returning to the "fire's core" of language. Merton "dealt with it as [he] could" in the poetry of *Cables to the Ace* (1968), an experimental book that critiques language in our age as "familiar liturgies of misunderstanding," words that have strayed as far as possible from their "fire's core," words infected by the emptiness of advertising and officialese, by the garbled grammar of the Unspeakable. *Cables to the Ace* is perhaps Merton's most ironic "raid on the unspeakable." There he holds up portraits of language tutored by Mammon, Moloch, and Belial, as he advises the Reader, "My attitudes are common and my ironies are no less usual than the bright pages of your favorite magazine."¹³⁶ Those ironies are alive, for example, in his parody of Yeats' "The Lake Isle of Innisfree":

I will get up and go to Marble country
Where deadly smokes grow out of moderate heat
And all the cowboys look for fortunate slogans
Among horses' asses.¹³⁷

The line once taut to the Word seems to be nearly severed, he warns: "the sayings of the saints are put away in air-conditioned archives"; your "Words replaced by moods," and "your confessions are filed /

135. Ibid.

136. Thomas Merton, "Prologue," *Cables to the Ace*, in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 395.

137. Ibid., #61, 434.

In the dialect / Of bureaux and electrons."¹³⁸ "In holy ways there is never so much must," the "comic" poet of Merton's Lograire speaks,¹³⁹ but in the land of the Unspeakable, the cables are stretched taut to "must," to the grim requirements of appointments, strategies, circuits, and vectors:

And each must know the number of his key
With a key in his eye and an eye for numbers
A number of appointments
A truly legal score:
And each must find his logical apartment.¹⁴⁰

Poetry dwells in quite a different place, where "must" implies sacred possibility:

I think poetry must
I think it must
Stay open all night
In beautiful cellars.¹⁴¹

And the poet does, too, as he "walk[s] away from this poem"—"I am about to make my home / In the bell's summit" and "learn by the cables of orioles," keeping a line taut to a very different source of words:

I will call the deep protectors out of the ground
The givers of wine
The writers of peace and waste
And sundown riddles.¹⁴²

In Tension Toward the New

The poets of both *Cables to the Ace* and *Relearning the Alphabet* turn a prophet's ear to language, fulfilling what Merton himself says of prophecy in "A Message to Poets":

To prophesy is not to predict, but to seize upon reality in its moment of highest expectation and tension toward the new. This ten-

138. *Ibid.*, #2, 396; #3, 397; #5, 398.

139. Merton, *Collected Poems*, 459.

140. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, #52, 431.

141. *Ibid.*, #53, 431.

142. *Ibid.*, #87, 453.

sion is discovered not in hypnotic elation but in the light of everyday existence. Poetry is innocent of prediction because it is itself the fulfillment of all the momentous predictions hidden in everyday life.¹⁴³

Levertov's own terms for the role of the prophet in poetry are contained in the 1981 essay "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," where she makes clear the connections between poet and prophet which are often embodied in "Staying Alive" and other politically engaged poems. Hers is an essentially Hebraic understanding of the "vatic" role that keeps her grounded "in the world," and writing out of the "light of everyday existence." Sir Philip Sidney praised the psalmist David for "handling his prophecy" like a poet, an exemplary *Vates*,¹⁴⁴ and Levertov returns, like Sidney, to an older, essentially Hebraic understanding of the vatic and prophetic. Her attention to time, her witness of history, her exploration of a language that disturbs conventions and powers—all resemble the Hebrew prophet, the *nabi*, whose role was not limited to prediction of the future.

The *nabi*-prophet has a crucial role to play in the relationships among word, human being, and divine Being. First of all, as Buber explains, the *nabi* is not a translator or interpreter of an antecedent language, something already spoken:

the *nabi* does not convey a finished speech that has already become audible; rather he shapes to sound a secret, soundless speech, in the human sense, pre-verbal, in the divine, primordially verbal, as the mouth of a person shapes to sound the secret, soundless speech of his innermost being. . . . For the prophetic word of the Bible, in contrast to that of the Delphic oracle, means that the originating speech and the finished speech are Biblically identical, whereas in the Hellenic an ecstatic babbling must first be transmitted into ordered speech.¹⁴⁵

Second, the Hebrew *nabi* works not merely in one direction, "from above to below," but as a mediator *between* God and man. The role of the *nabi* is to aid the dialogue between human and divine, not merely

143. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 159.

144. Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry. The Golden Hind: An Anthology of Elizabethan Prose and Poetry*, eds. Roy Lamson and Hallett Smith, revised ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1956) 274.

145. Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, 156–7.

to bear a proclamation or announcement: "The *nabi* only exists in the relation between deity and humanity, as the mediator of the speech, the 'bearer of the word in the vertical plan.'"¹⁴⁶ And third, unlike the Greek prophet, who serves as a "mouthpiece" for the gods, the *nabi* is not appropriated in part, in *piece*, for divine purposes. Instead, Buber explains, "It is decisively important to observe that God does not say here that he wants to use the human mouth as His own: *the whole human person* shall be as a mouth to him. That the Greek prophet is not and cannot be. His mouth 'speaks forth,' not his person."¹⁴⁷ God and human retain their otherness and consequently, their wholeness, their *sanity*, as "the Biblical distance between God and man is still preserved."¹⁴⁸

The similarities of the *nabi's* language to Denise Levertov's organic poetics as well as to Merton's aesthetic in the sixties are important. "Form is never more than a revelation of content" Levertov has said. The things of the world speak in their own inherent forms, and it is up to the poet to unveil, discover, or reveal them, not to find or invent forms to contain them. Received forms, poetic or otherwise, are often incapable, in Levertov's view, of revealing the "strawness of a straw,"¹⁴⁹ the divine spark she believes present in all created things and beings. When the poet attends to the world with discipline, intensity, and reverence, form arises in consort with content, in revelations of *quidditas*. The relationship of form to content, moreover, can only be discovered "in the work, not before it," Levertov asserts.¹⁵⁰ The *nabi*, the prophet poet delivers a language "in the grasp of a hand," raw, not received. Merton's "message to poets" is nearly synonymous in its understanding of prophecy and the poem's origin. "We who are poets," he says,

know that the reason for a poem is not discovered until the poem itself exists. The reason for a living act is realized only in the act itself. This meeting is a spontaneous explosion of hopes. That is why it is a venture in prophetic poverty.¹⁵¹

146. *Ibid.*, 155.

147. *Ibid.*, 156–7.

148. *Ibid.*, 156.

149. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 51.

150. *Ibid.*, 9.

151. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 155.

In her review of *Relearning the Alphabet*, Sr. Bernetta Quinn calls Levertov a "prophet in the Flannery O'Connor sense."¹⁵² Among the many intersections of Levertov's and O'Connor's aesthetics, including the practice of organic form,¹⁵³ is their shared belief that "ordinary speech no longer suffices" in our day, as Levertov puts it.¹⁵⁴ In "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," Levertov says,

In this dangerous, extraordinary time we can't, I feel, rely solely on the subtle and delicate possibilities of change implicit in the giving and receiving of all art; we also need direct images in our art that will waken, warn, stir their hearers to action; images that will both appall and empower.¹⁵⁵

Levertov was criticized by many for recording appalling, "unpoetic" scenes of war:

. . . 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-gulley.¹⁵⁶

Abraham Heschel explains that it is not simply the prophet's words that are "enlarged," but that the prophet herself feels and perceives events and experiences as much larger, more consequential, than the ordinary person. There is no hiatus between eye and tongue:

Indeed, the sort of crimes and even the amount of delinquency that fill the prophets of Israel with dismay do not go beyond that which we regard as normal, as typical ingredients of social dynamics. To us a single act of injustice—cheating in business, exploitation of the poor—is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it

152. Sister Bernetta Quinn, O.S.F., "Review of *Relearning the Alphabet*," *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993) 29.

153. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969). "Art requires," says O'Connor, "a delicate adjustment of the outer and inner worlds in such a way that, without changing their nature, they can be seen through each other" (34–5).

154. Levertov, *New and Selected Essays*, 149.

155. *Ibid.*

156. Levertov, "Life at War," *Poems 1968–72*, 122.

is a deathblow to existence: to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world. . . .¹⁵⁷

Neither Merton nor Levertov is "thinking too exclusively of the predictive sense of the word *prophecy*"¹⁵⁸ when they consider the vatic role of the poet in the world. Merton identifies the "Christian poet" as "the successor to David and the Prophets; he contemplates what was announced by the poets of the Old Testament; he should be, as they were, a mystic, full of divine fire."¹⁵⁹ Levertov also looks to the ancient Hebrew prophets for her model, finding several roles for their utterance: threat, promise, reproach, admonition. But to those she adds her own: "above all . . . the prophets provide words of witness."¹⁶⁰ It is within the role of witness that Levertov's prophet sings in consort with the psalmist. She insists that, along with lamentations for "the whole flesh of the still unburned," "a poetry of praise is equally necessary" in a time of dearth, "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."¹⁶¹

The praise essential to poetry and prophecy has nothing to do with the anesthetic verse of the "insensitively cheerful"; authentic praise, "that profound impulse . . . is trivialized if its manifestations do not in some way acknowledge their context of icy shadows."¹⁶² This praise, as Levertov defines it, is not an "escape—not instead of but as well as developing our consciousness of what Man is doing to the world and how we as individuals are implicated" and it takes all the power of the imagination, she continues, to "create works that celebrate" goodness and beauty under the shadow of Babel.¹⁶³ When Levertov looks at the ancient Jewish psalmist-prophets and their efficacy she sees that "what they had to say had to be said *powerfully*, with imagination and linguistic resourcefulness" in order to do more than re-present; rather, the call is to transform:

157. Abraham Heschel, "What Manner of Man is the Prophet?" *Parabola: Prophets and Prophecy* 21.1 (February 1996) 6.

158. Levertov, *New and Selected Essays*, 147.

159. Merton, *Literary Essays*, 344.

160. Levertov, *New and Selected Essays*, 148.

161. *Ibid.*, 146.

162. *Ibid.*

163. *Ibid.*, 144.

prophetic utterance, like poetic utterance, transforms experience and moves the receiver to new attitudes. . . . they are "inspired," they breathe in revelation and breathe out new words; and by so doing they transfer over to the listener or reader a parallel experience, a parallel intensity, which impels that person into new attitudes and new actions.¹⁶⁴

Levertov's comments in "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival" indicate an affinity with her Jewish ancestors that not only directs her *making* (poems "hard as the floor"), but her role in the service of art and society. Levertov's poetry consistently moves from 'I' to 'we'; her art has a social function that is fundamental to the utterance of both psalmist and prophet. To witness like a prophet is to praise and lament like a psalmist.

Merton's "Message to Poets," originally delivered in 1964 in Mexico City to a group of new Latin-American poets¹⁶⁵ concludes not with the familiar liturgies of secular aesthetics, but with a credo and liturgy both ancient and modern, clothed in a contemporary psalmist-prophet's imperatives for language:

Word-magic is an impurity of language and of spirit in which words, deliberately reduced to unintelligibility, appeal mindlessly to the vulnerable will. *Let us* deride and parody this magic with other variants of the unintelligible, if we want to. But it is better to prophesy than to deride. . . . *Let us* obey life, and the Spirit of Life that calls us to be poets, and we shall harvest many new fruits for which the world hungers. . . . *Let us* be proud of the words that are given to us for nothing; not to teach anyone, not to confute anyone, not to prove anyone absurd, but to point beyond all objects into the silence where nothing can be said. We are not persuaders. We are children of the Unknown.¹⁶⁶

The direction Merton's own poetic and aesthetic journey appeared to be taking in the late nineteen-sixties pointed him, like Levertov, beyond all wordiness to the Word. Guy Davenport finds it tempting "to see a visual commentary on the conversation" between Merton and Levertov in the Meatyard photos that document their visit that December day in 1967 at Gethsemani.¹⁶⁷ He sees their

164. *Ibid.*, 148.

165. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 159.

166. *Ibid.*, 159, 160.

167. Meatyard, 93.

conversation about self-immolation re-imaged by Meatyard's camera in fiery forms:

Levertov is seated in front of an active fireplace. The vivid wood grain of the cedar altar over the hearth opening recalls flames. Another image of the altar is superimposed in that of the gas heater. . . . A second image of the altar candle hovers under a thermometer, which blends together with an altar icon. (93)

What both Denise Levertov and Thomas Merton may have shared that day together, but certainly in their parallel journeys as poets in the 1960s, was a conviction about language that took words back to the "fire's core" where the purifying heat and light of the Word could be restored in the world.

It is also tempting to speculate about the various parallels and divergences that might have existed in the 1990s between the poetic vocations of Denise Levertov and Father Louis. Levertov continues to be a vital poet in the world, harvesting "new fruits for which the world hungers" in the recent poems of volumes such as *Evening Train* (1992) and *Sands of the Well* (1996). Nearly twenty-five years after Merton's death, Levertov remembers "one of the tapes of informal lectures Merton gave at Gethsemani in the 1960's," and the fruit of her memory is a poem, "On a Theme by Thomas Merton." Its lines imagine the suffering of a God whose call goes unanswered, whose effort at conversation is unmet:

'Adam, where are you?'
 God's hands
 palpate darkness, the void
 that is Adam's inattention,
 his confused attention to everything,
 impassioned by multiplicity, his despair.¹⁶⁸

God gropes for a "Fragmented Adam" who dizzies himself "like a child / at a barbaric fairgrounds," absent both to himself and to the God who "suffers the void that is his absence."¹⁶⁹ The multiplicity that leads to despair is the chaotic shape-shifting of a culture and an age which has lost its mooring in the covenantal *dabar*, the Word in the world.

168. Levertov, *Evening Train* (New York: New Directions, 1992) 113.

169. Levertov, *Evening Train*, 113.

The "true artist" of the Toltec poem to which both Merton and Levertov responded is "multiple" in a radically different way: fluid in unfolding, restless as a pilgrim is restless, "faring / forth into the grace of transformed / continuance."¹⁷⁰ Both Levertov and Merton became "poets in the world" during the decade of the sixties in ways which took them forever out of the "logical apartments" of dogma, either aesthetic or ecclesiastical, and into the geography of the *oikoumenikos*, "the whole inhabited world," the open house of God, which is where they once met, and where the conversation continues:

"No, God's in the wilderness next door
 —that huge tundra room, no walls and a sky roof . . ."¹⁷¹

170. Levertov, *Poems 1968–72*, 92.

171. Levertov, *Oblique Prayers*, 78.