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7

Fragile Beauty

Tension and Transcendence in Denise Levertov's Eco-theological Poetics

MICHAEL P. MURPHY

PART ONE—BEAUTIFUL

IN THE FINAL TERCETS of Denise Levertov's 1989 poetic meditation "In California: Morning, Evening, Late January," the poet asks a sustained question:

Who can utter
the poignance of all that is constantly
threatened, invaded, expended

and constantly
nevertheless
persists in beauty . . . ?¹

In characteristic fashion, Levertov's query is anchored in the vastly powerful thought-form of paradox, a propositional relationship which she articulated in her 1988 essay "Paradox and Equilibrium" as a "sustained synthesis of

1. Levertov, *Door in the Hive*, 43.

irreconcilable elements."² The central role of paradox in her poetics can neither be overemphasized nor overstated; and in Levertov, "paradox" becomes more than a thought-form, more than a poetic device. Paradox reveals itself as the mysterious phenomenon that it is: both the aesthetic locus of hardscrabble insight and a transcending linguistic sign that unveils deep truth. My remarks here attempt to disclose how paradox figures poetically in Levertov and how it nourishes the development of her theological imagination, an imagination that ranges from incarnational to ecological—and many places in between. Paradox not only fires and refines the aesthetic power of Levertov's integral vision, but, more importantly, it also becomes for her a vast optic for grace and is therefore revelatory of God. Exploring Levertov's 1989 poem "In California"—and the provocative ideas that the poem elicits and communicates—will provide the central textual terrain from which to flesh these ideas out. In addition, forays into several kindred critical texts, all of which mine the theological possibilities inherent in formal paradox, will enrich the discussion and supply firm ground for a decidedly liturgical consideration of Levertov's eco-theological poetics.

For Levertov, paradox was a way of life. It not only describes the enigmatic terrain of her inner cartography and the unique shape of personal journey, but it also became a way of understanding and navigating the expression of her poetic, theological, and political commitments. Levertov's life was characterized by so many rich personal and philosophical paradoxes that it becomes not only interesting but necessary to interrogate the vast complex of opposites upon which her aesthetic vision is built. She navigated complicated tensions between her domestic and artistic selves in her roles as friend, spouse, mother, sister, and daughter. She constantly transgressed these roles in preference for something more fluid and porous, a life that became, paradoxically, both singular and variegated. She was both married and at the same time critical of bourgeois notions of fidelity; she was religiously peripatetic, a seeking pilgrim who was at once a Russian-Hasidic-Anglo-Christian-Welsh-American-Ignatian-Catholic; she loved to travel the world with gusto as much as she did nesting in quiet retreat—a late modern anchoress of Cambridge, Palo Alto, or Seattle. Levertov was a "both/and" thinker before "both/and" became an identity cliché, as a composite study from an early poem, "The Earthwoman and the Waterwoman," reveals:

The earthwoman
has oaktree arms. Her children
full of blood and milk

2. Levertov, "Paradox and Equilibrium," in *New and Selected Essays*, 140.

stamp through the woods shouting.
The waterwoman
sings gay songs in a sad voice
with her moonshine children.³

For Levertov, such identity tensions are not, in the end, tensions at all. Just the opposite: dwelling constructively in vast fields of contradiction promoted in Levertov the development of an integral vision and prompted the retrieval of an original wholeness, the kind of which has been forgotten by the world. In this sense, the navigation of opposites in her poetry provides a most authentic human texture; and because it does, it also introduces us to a more expansive theological anthropology alive in her work, the incarnational and revelatory essence of which is approached most expertly by the lyric heart of her poetry and prayer.⁴ In this sense, Levertov sings along with Whitman when he sings,

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)⁵

Levertov's poetry traffics in wide-ranging inversions and locates the profound truths that pulsate beneath them. In "In California," Levertov stitches together a poetic meditation par excellence, creating a sustained array of dynamic tensions that both track a local ecological conflict and keep her reader perched on the crux of a spiritual breaking-point. In its tripartite structure, the poem travels in the liminal borderland that illuminates and negotiates several collisions of opposites—of "evening and morning"; of "Destructive construction"; of "Fragile paradise." The concluding lines of the poem also resolve in a collision of opposites; but in this case the register of meaning is transformed—an effect achieved by virtue of the poem's organic unfolding as art that "enfaiths," a neologism coined by Levertov that describes the movement from grace to action. In this sense, "In California" becomes an aesthetic "faith that does justice"—a poem with a purpose—and holds together the complexity and mystery of a demanding grammar.⁶ The action demanded first by the poem, of course, is one of prayerful

3. Levertov, "The Earthwoman and the Waterwoman," in *Selected Poems*, 4.

4. The dynamism between theology and anthropology at heart in Levertov's poetry is interpreted in a kindred way by theologian Karl Rahner. In particular, Rahner redefines incarnation, not merely as a "one and done" entry into the world of Jesus, but (as he argues in *Theological Investigations III*) as "the irrevocable presence of God in human nature and history," a presence that anchors Levertov's sacramental poetics.

5. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 51.

6. Levertov, "Work That Enfaiths," in *New and Selected Essays*, 257.

contemplation: to identify spiritually with the concluding lament uttered by a speaker who cries-out from the crucible of ecological degradation where all is "threatened, invaded, expended." But it is also a lament that effervesces and pumps with the mercy implicit in it—thereby demanding in the reader a second action: to face the fact of human complicity in ecological degradation and to commit to the political acts of justice and reparation needed to tend to the growing wound wrought by anthropogenic climate change.

"In California" is exemplary in that it retrieves the theological connection between aesthetics and ethics, between beauty and action. As Pope Francis recently observed in his encyclical, *Laudato Si'* (2015), the earth, "our Sister" now "cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her."⁷ Levertov's poetic life anticipates and engenders such insights; and the paradoxical intensity of her lyrical collisions not only indicate the structural depth of an increasingly refined theological vision, but also becomes a more articulate expression of the way that poetry can engineer and promote ecological justice. Of course, Levertov's eco-sensibilities are ancient and native—as is her vocation as poet-citizen; but the decidedly eco-theological expression of her concern, moving in the late eighties in concert with her increasingly public religious turn, began at this time to achieve a more urgent and fevered pitch.

In her essay "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," Levertov pulls no punches when it comes to what a prayerfully oriented poetry can achieve, particularly as a catalyst for eco-theological awareness and action: "But we need also a poetry of praise," she writes, "of love for the words, the vision of the potential for good even in our species which has so messed up the rest of creation, so fouled up its own nest."⁸ To most religious critics, the eco-theology implicit in Levertov's theo-poetics makes less sense without a more conventional theology to undergird it, but this also becomes a precise point of contention. Levertov owned-up at this time to practicing a "do-it-yourself theology," but it was one that was also in qualitative alignment with an abundance of late modern theology. Christian life, according to contemporary theologians as disparate in orientation as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Jean-Luc Marion, has been tainted and tamed by Enlightenment certitude and rational justification; the process of its renewal, as Levertov shows, can be achieved by a poetics of inter-connectedness which might inspire acts of transformative love more consistent with the acts of Jesus in the Gospel. It was clear that it was precisely in the poems that such a "process took

7. Francis, *Laudato Si'*, #2.

8. Levertov, "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," in *New and Selected Essays*, 144.

place"—the process of moving spiritually and theologically toward a *praxis*-oriented Catholicism, "that long swim through waters of unknown depth."⁹ For Levertov, it is in and through poems where concrete theological mysteries such as the sacramental connection between ecology and Incarnation were laid bare and cultivated, an aesthetic way of knowing that had for her "been also a conversion process, if you will."¹⁰

In this sense, the prayed part of the poem is essential. The prayer is the result of so many years of the poet's hungry and restless quest to see things as they are—a desire that, by 1989, had become more and more self-consciously Catholic. In "In California," then, we are given not only a full expression of an increasingly refined incarnational imagination—again, one that sees in poetry an act of "enfaithing"—but the poem is also a living vision of a robust eco-theological aesthetics. The vision, moreover, participates in a rich tradition of theology and the arts, a tradition which is not only incarnational in its consciousness and sacramental in its aesthetic orientation, but one that is also (and perhaps most importantly) liturgical in its call for active participation.

To be sure, when we engage in critical conversations about theology and the arts, we focus first, quite naturally, on the incarnational or sacramental sense—how the artifact in question instantiates some otherwise disincarnate theological quality. But it is the liturgical sense that is perhaps most critical and completes this theological trilemma. It is liturgy that empowers and activates sacramental aesthetics and poetics in decisive ways and calls us most explicitly to participation ("*sursum corda*"—"lift up your hearts"). It is liturgy that calls us to action (*Ite, missa est*—Go! You have work to do. I have no limbs but yours); it is liturgy that calls us to acts of justice and mercy. Liturgy is the crucial key to Levertov's realization of both the politics and *praxis* of poetry which stands before God—"that trembling web of being"—duty-bound to act, for a "poetry articulating the dreads and horrors of our time is necessary . . . but to tell the tale and walk away isn't enough."¹¹ For these reasons, I say even more: for Levertov "In California" points to nothing less than the liturgical consummation of poetry.

This, of course, is a bold claim and requires some qualification. Dana Greene and her excellent *Denise Levertov: A Poet's Life* is of solid service here and distills a pivotal moment in Levertov's life, one where Levertov recognizes and articulates a liturgical awareness to which she has always

9. Levertov, "Work That Enfaiths," in *New and Selected Essays*, 249, 251, 250.

10. *Ibid.*, 250.

11. Levertov, "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," in *New and Selected Essays*, 153, 149.

been drawn. As Greene observes, by 1987 or so Levertov "overcame her theological stumbling block":

Both art and faith were dependent on imagination; both were "ventures into the unknown." And both were, as she had indicated in an obscure lecture given some twenty-five years earlier, testimonies of the "*participation mystique*," by which she meant that both art and faith assumed the existence of a spirit and the "involvement of the individual in a life beyond itself."¹²

The "participation mystique" that Levertov endorses and with which she reckons in the late eighties is essentially liturgical. The "involvement of the individual in a life beyond itself" was already of profound value to Levertov (as her long record of activism and works for peace attest); but the liturgical consummation of her art was a newer development, one that both transformed the trajectory of her poetics and also made a space for another conscious involvement—this time in ecological activism. In this sense we begin to see the consummation more clearly. The explicit link between the aesthetic power of liturgy and the aesthetic power of poetry is a compelling combination that moves us to prayer and action, or as Levertov has it: "How can it serve to record, in words and pictures, 'man's inhumanity to man'—and to the earth and all that is in it—when people have developed protective shells of numbness? There is only one way—the way of aesthetic power."¹³

Clearly, the concept of liturgy is profoundly rich. On the one hand, "Liturgy" in the old Greek way, is quite literally "public service." It requires public action to achieve the common good and discloses one essential aspect of human participation in the polis. Theologically speaking "Liturgy"—specifically in the form of the Catholic mass to which Levertov was so increasingly drawn—expands the stage and opens its scope to the transcendent horizon. Liturgy is both active and contemplative; it is word and silence, presence and absence. It recapitulates and performs a bloodless sacrifice. It is a variegated cascade of movement, prayer, and aesthetic beauty in several modes. Liturgy, in its rawest form is participation and communion in the mystical body of Christ, a physical enfleshment of deep reality, a rhythmic and steady expression of our lives in God. From the later eighties onward, especially after her move to Seattle, Levertov was more explicitly liturgical—not only in regards to attending mass, but also in attending (and even giving) retreats. As Donna Hollenberg writes in *A Poet's Revolution*, these later years, particularly at St. Joseph Parish in Seattle where Levertov became a "regular congregant," were spiritually rich and sustaining.

12. Greene, *Denise Levertov: A Poet's Life*, 179.

13. Levertov, "Paradox and Equilibrium," in *New and Selected Essays*, 139.

Levertov even undertook the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, an experience that harmonized so well with her incarnational heart and one so worthy of further study.¹⁴ As Hollenberg notes, it was also during this period when Levertov developed a definitively sacramental poetics with "emphasis on the act of composition itself, in which matter is transubstantiated by artistic form," a poetics "derived from the Roman Catholic belief in the 'real presence,'" which became increasingly more explicit and self-conscious in her thought and work.¹⁵ During these later years, Levertov also began to see how her insights into paradox were becoming baptized, if you will, by both the spiritual and physical irruptions that attend the connection among the Incarnational, Sacramental, and Liturgical—and the phenomena to which they are so intimately attached.

PART TWO—TRUE

In order to suggest the shape of a mature eco-theological poetics by way reading of a representative poem is also to consider the precise shape of the piece in question. Again, the triadic structure of "In California" is the first clue and is a perfect vehicle to both engineer and reveal the paradox that resides at the heart of Levertov's—and the poem's—integral vision. Levertov, like her poetic mentor William Carlos Williams, favored triadic construction. In Williams's case, the structure was employed more for acoustics than for content, but the aesthetic principle coheres. For her part, Levertov doesn't always employ the triadic line as a formal device, but it is a regular feature in her work and serves as a bridge between poetic sound and theological sense. Williams liked triadic structure because it made way for what he called "a threesome of ones"; and, for anyone with an inchoate Trinitarian imagination, this is a meaningful subtext.¹⁶ In any case, that both triad and paradox had been a constituent element in Levertov's poetics many years before her conversion is important to note. Her 1964 poem "City Psalm" is often cited as exemplary of this vision:

I have seen
not behind but within, within the
dull grief, blown grit, hideous
concrete facades, another grief, a gleam

14. Hollenberg, *Poet's Revolution*, 416. Three weeks after her diagnosis of lymphoma, she expresses interests in the exercises and begins them not long after. Powerful meditations about these experiences are outlined in her notebooks.

15. *Ibid.*, 395–96.

16. Levertov, "On Williams' Triadic Line," in *New and Selected Essays*, 24.

as of dew, an abode of mercy,
 have heard not behind but within noise
 a humming that drifted into a quiet smile.
 Nothing was changed, all was revealed otherwise;
 not that horror was not, not that the killings did
 not continue, not that I thought there was to be no more despair,
 but that as if transparent all disclosed
 an otherness that was blessed, that was bliss.
 I saw Paradise in the dust of the street.¹⁷

To see through the mist of false binaries to the third sense is to announce an integral vision. In "City Psalm," Levertov tells the story of living this pivotal experience. To see "not behind but within" the synthesis of grief and mercy that lies at the heart of things; to hear "not behind but within" the synthesis of agitation and serenity; to see that paradise is indeed resident in the dust of the street—this textured vision reveals nothing less than the mystical ground that authentic paradox discloses. Fundamentally, it is an expression of the *complexio oppositorum* (i.e., the transcendent unity of opposites) that has fired the imagination of thinkers as varied as Hildegard of Bingen, Nicholas of Cusa, Carl Jung, and Michel de Certeau.

And it has also fired the imagination of Levertov scholar Albert Gelpi. In *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism* (1993), Gelpi, speaking about Levertov's poems from this period (like "City Psalm," like "Here and Now," like "O Taste and See") reflects,

The poems again and again break into a celebration of the sacredness, even the sacramentality of temporal experience; not just the organic beauty and sublimity of natural creation but intimations of essentializing spirit breaking through even the ugly, violent brutality of urban life.¹⁸

By the late eighties and into the early nineties, Levertov inhabits the equilibrium of this sacred vision more consciously. Gelpi's observation discloses what Levertov remembers in 1990 as "the interaction of artistic labor and incipient faith," the revelatory moments in her life as a poet that were ruptured by "the workings of the Holy Spirit, or is that too presumptuous?"¹⁹ The dynamic and organic naming and ordering of complex opposites (such as in "O Taste and See": "grief, mercy, language, tangerine, weather, to breathe them, bite, savor, chew, swallow, transform")

17. Levertov, "City Psalm," in *Selected Poems*, 36.

18. Gelpi, "Introduction: Centering the Double Image," in *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism*, 7.

19. Levertov, "Work That Enfaiths," in *New and Selected Essays*, 250.

is, by the later years of Levertov's life, more deeply aware of the presence of the "essentializing spirit" that Gelpi perceives—the "Holy Spirit," as Levertov dares name it in 1990, even if she does so with a humble note of agnostic reservation.

In "In California," the spiritual distance between "generosity" and "shame" is somehow flattened by such mysteries, a poetic figuring that presses on the theological tension between grace and sin—specifically, in this case, ecological sin. Other pairings in the poem indicate the spiritual proximity between opposites—how "tranquil moon" drinks light from a "vanished sun," how it can be "babel" at noon and serene by, say, 6:30 PM in the gloaming twilight; how lawns that are poisoned by pesticides are situated amidst other grasses where there is "no green more brilliant." These concepts first appear irreconcilable and dualistic, but the longer view, distilled in a later poem, "Sojourns in the Parallel World," suggests the rejection of such gnostic thinking:

a world devoid
 of our preoccupations, free
 from apprehension—though affected,
 certainly, by our actions. A world
 parallel to our own though overlapping.
 We call it "Nature;" only reluctantly
 admitting ourselves to be "Nature" too.²⁰

To stare unflinchingly at the fullness of creation is to assent to our place in it, "a power to utter yes or no—to perceive the whole range of dualities without which there could be no freedom."²¹ And it is freedom, precisely and paradoxically, that is required in order to transcend dualism—so as to realize interdependence with nature, so as to behold, as Levertov does in her 1989 poem "St. Thomas Didymus," the luminous, integral unity that moves all creation:

all things quicken to color, to form,
 my question
 not answered but given
 its part
 in a vast unfolding design lit
 by a risen sun.²²

20. Levertov, "Sojourns in the Parallel World," in *Sands of the Well*, 49.

21. Levertov, "Work That Enfaiths," in *New and Selected Essays*, 251.

22. Levertov, "St. Thomas Didymus," in *Door in the Hive*, 101. To perceive inherent paradoxes and tensions as unfolding to unity in the light of the "risen sun" invokes the famous meditation of a similar vision from Annie Dillard's 1974 classic *Pilgrim*

In "In California" we behold a similar radiance. The poem is a mature sacramental poetics, to be sure, but we are also treated to one of the oldest moves in the Catholic playbook—that is, to hold two contradictory things, one up against the other, and then to proceed as if they are not contradictory. Of course, this aesthetic tradition is *Incarnational* to the bone and therefore seeks to penetrate the transcendent mystery of reality. In a conceptual sense, as we have noted, Levertov plumbs the depth of poetic language in order to explore its reach and then ground theological ideas in the carnality of existence. In a Gospel sense, this aesthetic tradition is *Incarnational* in its navigation of opposites as a pre-political phenomenon that becomes embodied and performed historically by the Creator and sustainer of the universe who, paradoxically, condescends to move through a human womb to be born in a barn. Revelations such as these ramp-up the closer we look at the creation where, as in her late poem "Primary Wonder," the "quiet mystery becomes present":

the mystery
that there is anything, anything at all,
let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,
rather than void . . .²³

Because she is fundamentally a theologian, locating the limitless mystery of "presence-in-absence" is the point toward which the entire body of Levertov's work leans; and her poetry incorporates such paradoxes precisely because they encapsulate the infinite fullness of an intricate theological vision. In this sense Levertov reminds us that "art which can effectively fulfill its didactic potential is art which sacrifices no aesthetic values to make its point."²⁴ Moreover, as Levertov came to realize, such a poetics also flattens byzantine cultural or intellectual distances because it is rooted philosophically in a normative metaphysics, one that is firmly constituent and historically rooted in Christian theology as well.²⁵ The thought form of "paradox"—so essential in the work of major Catholic intellectuals such as the Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac and the neo-Thomistic philosopher Jacques Maritain—is, as de Lubac writes, "fundamental for any authentic

at *Tinker Creek*. Dillard beholds the sharks feeding at twilight off the Atlantic coast of Florida, a "sight that held awesome wonders: power and beauty, grace tangled in a rapture with violence" (*Annie Dillard Reader*, 287).

23. Levertov, "Primary Wonder," in *Selected Poems*, 192.

24. Levertov, "Paradox and Equilibrium," in *New and Selected Essays*, 140.

25. Levertov writes of this realization in "Work That Enfaiths": "It's an idea, or theory, undoubtedly familiar to many of you through works of religious philosophy; but for me, it was original" (*New and Selected Essays*, 251).

Christian theology," a theology premised on the dynamic complementarity between faith and reason. Opposing expressions, when conceived properly in terms of paradox, are understood neither to contradict one another nor to fuse into each other dialectically. Instead, together they point beyond themselves to the phenomenon that lies both "beneath" and "above" them. Paradox thus interpreted "does not sin against logic but is its most profound expression."²⁶

Levertov came to understand paradox in this way—as an equilibrium that discloses what is "beneath" and "above," what is "behind" and "through." As she observes in her essay "Paradox and Equilibrium,"

To maintain an equilibrium between the unflinching memorialization of what human beings are capable of doing, in all its terrifying ghastliness, and the beauty of line, form, and color, is not to subvert didactic engagement with something alien to its purpose, even though I have called it a paradoxical achievement; nor is such beauty a mere sugar coating to help us down the vile pill, for it is impotent unless it is fused with its content. It is not a sugar coating—yet without it no one would consent, or indeed be able, to look for long or repeatedly at images that rub our noses in such content.²⁷

Paradox goes to the truth: Neither a grotesque fatalism nor a sentimental sugar coating—but to the thing itself: a third thing that is both revealed in the commerce of opposites—as it does by the very triadic structure of "In California"—and which also, as importantly, mysteriously precedes such revelation: again, the famous "both/and" of the Catholic imagination. Theologically speaking, this is who Jesus is and this is what God is doing in the Trinitarian Godself of the divine economy as a leaven for the world. To hold this paradox and to live in its embrace is to recognize and enter-in to its liturgical quality—its "enfaithing" quality, as Levertov decides, where "faith acts as yeast in my life as a writer" so that what is written "may contribute to the life of other people."²⁸ This has specific value for the relationship between contemplation and action in eco-theological settings and how, for example, linking ecological action and environmental legislation to gratitude and sacramental awareness—as Pope Francis does in the landmark encyclical *Laudato Si'*—may inspire the political action so desperately needed. That it takes the surprising and often confounding form of a paradox is the surprising equilibrium. These are hard binaries to leave behind, especially in

26. David L. Schindler, preface to *Discovery of God*, by Henri de Lubac, x.

27. Levertov, "Paradox and Equilibrium," in *New and Selected Essays*, 141.

28. Levertov, "Work That Enfaiths," in *New and Selected Essays*, 257.

western cultures that are so mired in and paralyzed by gnostic dualisms and other forms of theological illiteracy and existential blindness.

PART THREE—GOOD

To critique the entrenched habit and poverty of gnostic dualism is a good way to conclude these remarks—and a way to offer hope for a robust future in eco-theological aesthetics that leads to active citizenship. In Albert Gelpi's most recent book, *American Poetry after Modernism: The Power of the Word*, we are treated to a series of sharp critical distinctions that help orient and amplify Levertov's eco-theological concern; and his masterly distillation of the differences between Levertov and Robert Duncan not only provide critical insight into one of the more complicated friendships of the twentieth century, but, if we pay close attention, they can also teach us about what someone like Pope Francis is up to in *Laudato Si'*—a document in which Levertov would surely rejoice:

Where Duncan was metaphysically Platonist and gnostic, religiously polytheist, morally Manichean and individualist, politically anarchist, and linguistically self-reflexive, Levertov was metaphysically incarnationalist, religiously monotheist and Christian, morally communitarian, politically socialist, and linguistically referential. Their divergent conceptions of the imagination and of poetry were at base the divergence between a gnostic theology and an incarnational theology.²⁹

Above all other things, eco-theology—because it is an incarnational theology *par excellence*—is also, in a decidedly Christian sense, a relational theology. As both Levertov and Pope Francis demonstrate, eco-theology transcends the often narrow and individualist boundaries of classic theological anthropology (not to mention consumerist/materialist economic systems), in order to include a relationship with all created things. "The philosophy implied here," as Levertov wrote in the early eighties, "is founded in a sense of the interdependence of all things, a sense of belonging to, rather than dominating, an ecosystem"—a key insight that Pope Francis, writing thirty years later, recapitulates.³⁰ "Our hearts are authentically open to universal communion," he declares, excluding "nothing and no one" because "everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for

29. Gelpi, *American Poetry after Modernism*, 193.

30. Levertov, "Paradox and Equilibrium," in *New and Selected Essays*, 141.

each of his creatures."³¹ It is holistic integration—not gnostic division—that best characterizes eco-theological concern; and it is aesthetic integration, the kind of which found in Levertov's sacramental poetics, which restores a vision that is both religiously incarnational (as in the "integral ecology" articulated in *Laudato Si'*) and "morally communitarian," as Gelpi writes of Levertov's sustained ethical interest—so much so that it stretches out to include the entire community of the cosmos. "In California" has this expansive and integrated concern and is a local expression of something more universal. It is a poem informed by Levertov's early readings of Martin Buber and his famous I-Thou relationality, a poem enriched by the message of political and ethical solidarity with all creation so well articulated by the tenets of Catholic social teaching, and a poem grounded by its physical participation in a kind of cosmic liturgy to which Francis alludes and in which the church incessantly prays. As Levertov observes, "God / (out of compassion for our ugly / failure to evolve) entrusts, / as guest, as brother, / the Word" so that the world itself, incarnated as it is by God's Word, shall "become a true cosmic liturgy, where the cosmos becomes a living host."³²

Such a liturgical reconciliation inspires the final prayer of "In California" and holds together—in one utterance—the unexpected unity of divine generosity and human culpability:

Who can utter
the praise of such generosity
or the shame?

To express gratitude for the generous gift of creation while at the same time expressing proper shame for treating the gift so poorly is to sit again on the crux of paradox. "Shame" and "sin" are words just about eradicated from our late modern vocabulary and serve as another example of Levertov's pointed, discriminating diction. Honest acknowledgment of legitimate shame about our part in anthropogenic climate change, about what Levertov called "global-bicidal insanity," clearly implies alert consciences.³³ Alert consciences ask for mercy; alert consciences are moved to proper action and restorative justice. "Blessed would be the sins that left any shame" in us, Bernanos's country priest counsels, another paradox that accesses the heart of mercy and moves

31. Francis, *Laudato Si'*, #92.

32. Levertov, "On the Mystery of the Incarnation," in *Door in the Hive*, 50. The meditation on cosmic liturgy is offered by Pope Benedict XVI in a homily celebrating the pioneering green paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin, SJ (Benedict XVI, Homily at the Vespers July 24, 2009, in the Cathedral of Aosta; *L'Osservatore Romano*, English online edition, July 29, 2009).

33. Levertov, "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," in *New and Selected Essays*, 149.

the spirit to acts of justice.³⁴ As Pope Francis reflects, concepts like "shame" and "sin" (and the moral realities to which they refer), are deftly exposed by "aesthetic sensibility." Such concepts, while "they may be couched in religious language" should not "detract from their value in public debate" for, as he concludes, "ethical principles capable of being apprehended by reason can always reappear in different guises and find expression in a variety of languages, including religious language"—and, we hasten to add, as Pope Francis does, "poetry."³⁵ In other words, beauty really can save the world.

In a diary entry from late September 1989, Levertov reflects about the state of things, just on the heels of her move to Seattle:

The place I have come to is as beautiful, and essentially calm, as I dreamed . . . But "dread is with me" too . . . for the New Yorker article by Bill McKibben about global warming is the most *chilling* news I have ever read, worse than all the information on violence, war, torture, injustice, nuclear threat—I've ever read . . . The *best* we can hope for is only a partial alleviation of irreversible damage already done, the world's climate *already* changed, with all that that will mean to every aspect of life. Pray God he is not right. Pray God for mercy.³⁶

Of course, Levertov knew well that McKibben was right. And, in the prophetic reflex that was so native in her, she immediately counseled prayer for divine mercy in the face of such "chilling" news. She also responded to the news by writing "Tragic Error," a poem delivered with the ratcheted-up urgency proper to the gravity of its topic:

Surely we were to have been
earth's mind, mirror, reflective source.
Surely our task
was to have been
to love the earth,
to *dress and keep it* like Eden's garden.³⁷

But the poem, because it testifies again to collective human shame, is also a prayer for divine mercy. Because "as the eye blesses the hand"—and because "the eye" (i.e., God) also knows the innate goodness of creatures (even human creatures) and loves all "hands"—the prayer carried within it is the

34. Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest*, 159.

35. Francis, *Laudato Si'*, #199.

36. Denise Levertov papers, ca. 1918–96, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

37. Levertov, "Tragic Error," in *Evening Train*, 69.

prayer that humankind, remembering itself, will turn its head and heart to mercy and will participate in the acts of grace and generosity that mercy suckles and sustains. The final word here, then, must be "mercy"—the need for which, as Pope Francis has so eloquently shown, is perhaps greater today than ever before. To show mercy to the earth and to the disproportionate number of the poor affected by ecological crisis is to amplify the dynamic relationship between mercy and justice. To commit to the complicated political action needed is to atone in justice, as a human family, for abusing the marvelous gift so freely given to us all. An eco-theological poetics, the kind of which Levertov has so deftly discerned and crafted, therefore becomes a practical, pastoral art. It becomes a poetics of faith that teaches us how we can do better by affirming an ancient mystery: that the gift of mercy is gratuitous and implacable even in spite of our obdurate wills and intractable human frailties.

To live in the mercy of God . . .
Thus, not mild, not temperate,
God's love for the world. Vast
flood of mercy
flung on resistance.³⁸

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38. Levertov, "To Live in the Mercy of God," in *Sands of the Well*, 127.

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8

"passionate / reverence, active love"

Levertov and Weil in the Communion of Struggle

CYNTHIA R. WALLACE

It is faithful attention to the experience from the first moment of crystallization that allows those first or those forerunning words to rise to the surface: and with that same fidelity of attention the poet, from that moment of being let in to the possibility of the poem, must follow through, letting the experience lead him through the world of the poem, its unique inscape revealing itself as he goes.¹

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object . . . Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeing anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it.²

1. Levertov, "Some Notes on Organic Form," in *Poet in the World*, 9.

2. Weil, *Waiting for God*, 111–12.