Footprints by Denise Lervertov

Michele Birch

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It reminded me then, and still does to a lesser extent, of Lorca’s longer poems in Poet in New York. Bosquet’s approach or strategy is similar to that of Lorca. His choice of images is loose but never arbitrary; his language is rich, sometimes excessive; and most importantly, his control over the direction of the poem never falters. This is the key, I think, to Bosquet’s success. He allows himself the freedom to stray into new ideas and new images, but only so far. When the direction of the poem becomes endangered, he pulls it back into line. This is a marked contrast to other surrealistic poets. He is like the casual hiker on a long journey. He takes time to nap in the clover, inspect closely a wild flower, and wander off into new ravines. But always in his pocket is a compass pointing West. We younger American poets can and should learn from this man. The following is the last stanza of the poem. It contains lines that have haunted me for years. I’m sure, given the chance, the poem will burrow into you also.

In every bird a mountain slept.
In every hand the sacred reptile
ate salt. In every street of the port
an old bishop questioned a tree.
The wine was quite bare, and by the river
we mourned the savannas disappeared
since their rendezvous with the snow.
Because he lacked fire, the wizard took
the burning city as a bride.

Michele Birch

FOOTPRINTS
by Denise Levertov
New Directions, 1972

Denise Levertov, in Footprints, gives us the comprehensive understanding of a woman who has not only published ten books of poetry, but has developed an increasingly strong voice as the impact of history has tried to find sound and shape in each successive work. Always reverent in her approach to life and people she has become increasingly believable because of her sensitivity to the violent, uncontrollable suffering that has been a part of the twentieth century, and in particular the 1960's and 70's and the issue of Viet Nam. She includes it all in a book of 67 poems that carries an impact not easily forgotten.
The approach to *Footprints*, is across a threshold where the reader, in the first two poems is cautioned. To enter into this experience it is necessary to desire to do so, to be willing to look into the “ashpit,” the “Ashpit at the center,” and to wait, for at night there comes, “through the smokehole, the star.” Levertov’s star is the star of creativity, and it always rises no matter what the situation, to restore life and hope, though often she is concerned as to whether this star can keep rising, and how long. The way is thorny, and in “A Defeat in the Green Mountains,” she admits her fear. Fear for herself and for the children. Who can follow when, “The mud the foot stirs up frightens,” and there is, “No way to reach the open fields . . .?”

There is a mellow tone to this book. Again, it is the compassionate tone of the participant/observer who has lived and suffered. In “Living with a Painting,” she says, “The work ripens / within the temper of living around it.” People and friends are constantly coming within the framework of this observation, and often this becomes participation in relationship. “An Old Friend’s Self-Portrait,” reveals this in the lines, “this face / writes itself on triple-S board / signs itself in thick / ridges of paint, / break through the mirror.” Friends and their importance continue through “A New Year’s Garland for My Students / MIT: 1969-70. Strong statements about a vision of a shrinking world are present, a world shrinking not in the sense of becoming smaller but more manageable. In the section entitled, “Richard,” she says, “I hunger for a world / you can / live in forever.” After trying to stretch across the entire world the statement changes:

The very essence
of destiny hung over this house!
(this time) “and how was he,
a membrane stretched between the
light and darkness of the world,
not to become conscious of it?”

She compromises. “I want / a world you can live in.” Later, pushed to some ultimate realization, Richard, “feeling rather like a man standing on the roof / of a burning house,” leads her to say, “I want / a world.” Ted too, in this sequence sustains a kind of apocalyptic vision:

And an old man nearby
in a dark hut, who sits looking
into a pit of terror: hears
horror creeping upon the sea.
From the personal, Levertov moves to the urgent political issues. In, "Overheard Over South East Asia," dust from a bomb talks about itself mockingly, "My name in a whisper of sequins. Ha! / Each of them is a disk of fire, / I am the snow that burns," and in "Scenario," the whole tragic drama takes place in the meeting of Bride and Bridegroom, as follows:

Enter the Bride.
She has one breast, one eye,
half of her scalp is bald.
She hobbles toward center front.
Enter the Bridegroom,
a young soldier, thin, but without
visible wounds. He sees her.
Slowly at first, then faster and faster,
he begins to shudder, to shudder,
to ripple with shudders. Curtain.

Bride and Bridegroom capitalized assume the level of universality carried further in "M.C.5." Levertov identifies again with the heart of the world. She says:

(World's heart
keeps skipping a beat,
sweat crawls on the moon's white
stony face.
Life's
winding down.)

Finally in "The Malice of Innocence," a nurse who could easily be a guard at Dachau, for all her power, observes the world as though halfway through a film. Mortality in this poem is everyone's mortality and it is the mortality contained in all violence. In the hospital this vision of death is concretized through what the nurse sees, "in the folding / of white bedspreads according to rule / the starched pleats of a shroud," but for Levertov this universal shroud exists because of the knowledge of, "how black an old mouth gaping at death can look." The poet still finds her way into the final lines through her sense of the importance of naming, of recording, as the nurse at the end of her duties writes "details of agony carefully in the Night Report."

In the article, "Poetry in the Classroom," in *The American Poetry Review*, November/December, 1972, Levertov speaks of her political
concerns not as being more relevant to her life but as an integral part of her life as a poet. It is not she says, to use poetry as a vehicle for propaganda about which she is concerned, but rather the poet is to take, "personal and active responsibility for his words, whatever they are, and to acknowledge their potential influence on the lives of others." And she goes on to say, "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." Whatever touches on politics in Footprints, it is in such a large sense that no period of history, nor any oppressed people is really overlooked, even though, as she states in “Poetry in the Classroom,” we continue to eat during the five o'clock news while people are slaughtered before our eyes.

The creative process itself continues to be Levertov's central concern. As in her other books, it is, according to her statements in “Poetry in the Classroom,” analogous to childbirth, to being a father, and to being born. In, “Under a Blue Star,” images of the creative process recur as a kind of electrically induced song. “The days / a web of wires, of energies vibrating / in chords and single long notes of song.” Even so, the precariousness of the process plays itself against the exhilaration. In “3 a.m., September 1, 1969” for Kenneth Rexroth, she says:

It could be any age,
four hundred years ago or a time
of post-revolutionary peace,
the rivers clean again, birth rate and crops
somehow in balance . . .

Further, in “The Sun Going Down upon Our Wrath,” she tries to warn:

If there is time to warn you,
if you believed there shall be
never again the green blade in the crevice,
luminous eyes in rockshadow:
if you were warned and believed the warning . . .

then what . . . “could there be a reversal,” and finally she says:

I cannot
hoist myself high enough
to see,
plunge myself deep enough
to know?
“Forest Altar, September,” seems to affirm Levertov’s acceptance of her own stance. There is a kind of humility in this poem as the Jewish woman prays her own unique kind of psalm. “If there is only / now to live,” she says, “I’ll live / the hour till doomstroke / crouched with the russet toad, / my huge human size / no more account than a bough fallen:” and the prayer that follows to the maker of “moss gardens, the deep / constellations of green, the striate / rock furred with emerald, / inscribed with gold lichen / with scarlet!”, is somehow addressed to the same presence in the ashpit, the abyss. In “The Old King,” she says:

And at night—
the whole night a cavern, the world
an abyss—
lit from within:
a red glow
throbbling at the chinks.

It is the creativity of the pit, something she believes to be at the center of the world. “For God,” she says in “Poetry in the Classroom,” “read man and his imagination, man and his senses, man and man, man and nature—well, maybe ‘god,’ then, or ‘the gods.’ ” Whatever she is about her voice has found a toughness to accompany the reverence and compassion that brings us a thoroughly believable and moving poetry.

Edward Harkness

AFTER I HAVE VOTED
by Laura Jensen
The Gemini Press, Seattle. 1972
$1.00

Laura Jensen’s first volume of poems is full of the world’s strangeness, its violence and disappointments. Here’s a sample:

The Prairie

They had expected something placid,
a stream by a tree, leaves falling,
something old and unfamiliar as a sleigh
with the sleigh bells ringing.