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Denise Levertov, Life in the Forest

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Life in the Forest
by Denise Levertov
New Directions
1978
$3.95, paper; $8, cloth

In her introductory note to Life in the Forest, Denise Levertov mentions a "recurring need to vary a habitual lyric mode..." and a necessity to try to "avoid overuse of the autobiographical, the dominant first-person singular of so much of American poetry—good and bad—of recent years." I am delighted to report that she has met with only partial success.

Several years ago, in his American Poetry of the Twentieth Century, Kenneth Rexroth noted that American poetry "divides increasingly into Mandarin and non-Mandarin." By Mandarin, he alludes to the classic poetry of the T'ang and Sung periods during which poetry achieved perhaps its apex in all of written history, a time when poetry was everyone's business and was competently practiced by most every literate member of society, and practiced exquisitely by an inordinate number who became literary immortals. The best of the Mandarin poets combine Confucian notions of exactitude of language with the mysticism of Ch'an Buddhism and Taoism, the personal or "confessional" with the political and social. Poetry then, as now, was "news that stays news."

Levertov clearly belongs to the "Mandarin" poets of modern America. For the past twenty years her poetry has been personal in the most political sense, and political in the most personal sense. The daily workings of her life have long been the foundation upon which her literary career has turned—poems of love and marriage and motherhood, poems of opposition to war and of protest against sexism and racism at home, poems of nature and contemplation. She has never fallen into the egocentric trap of most first-person poets, but has steadfastly maintained aesthetic distance, producing a poetry of commitment and engagement, passionate without being strident.

In Life in the Forest, she successfully varies her "lyric mode." But, and more importantly to the body of her work, she has failed to remove the first person from the poems. She has merely spoken of
herself in the third person, much as Gary Snyder frequently removes the intrusive first person by simple omission. While such a tactic tends to make the first person less obvious, Levertov’s recent poems are autobiographical; she is a poet whose depth of perception is inexorably linked to experience, and those of us for whom she has been a great teacher and friend have learned the importance of that assimilation through her work.

Almost immediately, the poems of death of the poet’s mother stand out: they are among the most moving of all her work, and often achieve an almost unbearable compassion, as when, in “The 90th Year,” she says,

It has not been given her
to know the flesh as good in itself,
as the flesh of a fruit is good. To her
the human body has been a husk,
a shell in which souls were prisoned.

“I am so tired,” she has written to me, “of appreciating
the gift of life.”

As she has elsewhere stated, Levertov insists that “the obligation of readers is: not to indulge in the hypocrisy of merely vicarious experience. . .” And again, “The obligation of the writer is: to take personal and active responsibility for his words, whatever they are, and to acknowledge their potential influence on the lives of others. . . 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.”

This attitude is preeminently Confucian, and would account for her desire to remove her self from her poems in order to make them more easily entered by the reader. She stands aside, prepared to take full responsibility, not only for her words, but for her deeds, even for her humanitas.

Again, quoting from “Poet in the World,” she states, “Poets write bad political poems only if they let themselves write deliberate, opinionated rhetoric, misusing their art as propaganda. The poet does not use poetry, but is at the service of poetry.” Perhaps it is her
eagerness for a full participation in the business of living that informs these poems with strength of conviction, with the indelible muscle of quality meditation.

Several of the new poems are propelled by the necessity for rebuilding her life following the death of her mother and the dissolution of a marriage. While it must have been tempting to be seduced by the desire for bitterness, for vitriol, Levertov calms her voice through the meditative, into a soft full contemplative understanding. Throughout her publishing history, she has consistently presented poems that are at once politically active and brimming with pure humanity, humanness. And even now, she says, in “Movement:”

Towards not being
anyone else’s center
of gravity.

A wanting
to love: not
to lean over towards
an other, and fall,
but feel within one
a flexible steel
upright, parallel
to the spine but
longer, from which to stretch;
one’s own
grave springboard; the outflying spirit’s
vertical trampoline.

Her work is filled with examples of resistance to the too-simple laying of blame. It is her trademark, the uncanny ability to make even the most caustic experience into something dignified and useful, as she did with “Those groans men use/passing a woman on the street” in “The Mutes” ten years ago in *The Sorrow Dance*. There, she took an experience that must have been equal parts horror and revulsion, and made it over into a form of understanding, a pity for the empty lives of the self-deceived. And now she again demonstrates this strength of character in poems like “Wedding Ring:”

My wedding-ring lies in a basket
as if at the bottom of a well.
Nothing will come to fish it back up
and onto my finger again.
It lies
among keys to abandoned houses,
nails waiting to be needed and hammered
into some wall,
telephone numbers with no names attached,
idle paperclips.

It can’t be given away
for fear of bringing ill-luck.
It can’t be sold
for the marriage was good in its own
time, though that time is gone.

Could some artificer
beat into it bright stones, transform it
into a dazzling circlet no one could take
for solemn betrothal or to make promises
living will not let them keep? Change it
into a simple gift I could give in friendship?

How easy it would be to turn back on this small symbol of a marriage that didn’t last forever, to transform it not into a gift of friendship, but into the image of bondage and failure. But as she so often does, Levertov sees that it was “good in its time.”

If there is a lingering sense of loss in Life in the Forest, it is of a quality that is rare. Time and again I am reminded of the exquisite sorrow of Li Ch’ing-chao or of Yuan Chen. But this is not, finally, a book of sadness, nor of losses. It is a book of strengths and endurances measured against the losses we all learn to live with, and learn to live with more easily through poetry. These are poems of mature affection and engagement written by a mature poet at the height of her power.

Sam Hamill