

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION DENISE LEVERTOV

(1923 - 1997)

On December 20th, 1997 Denise Levertov died after a struggle with lymphoma. She was seventy five years of age. She had lived in Seattle for over a decade and it was there that she died, surrounded by family and friends. Though she described herself proudly in one of her poems as "London born", her life of expression and achievement was lived in the United States. Most of her books of poetry were written and published here. Her deepest, most eloquent engagements were with American poetry and politics. She was a superb teacher in the American tradition of poetry, albeit with the revisions and modifications of a genuinely radical poetic intelligence. From 1982 to 1993, during the years she taught at Stanford, she brought her particular distinction of spirit and ambition to the English Department, and especially the Creative Writing Program. She became a vivid and lovingly remembered presence within the Department and the University. She relished the music, the argument and the communal feel of the Stanford campus. And she gave to it, memorably, the witness of her ethics, the sound of her voice, and her seamless witness to both poetry and activism.

Denise Levertov was born in London in October, 1923, of parents whose religious and imaginative character shaped both her sense of herself and her poetic vocation. Her father was a Russian Hasidic Jew who converted to Christianity, emigrated to England, became an Anglican priest, and was active in Jewish-Christian dialogue in Britain between the world wars. Her Welsh mother had several visionaries among her forebears. Denise's first book, *The Double Image*, published in Britain in 1946, brought her recognition as one of a group of poets dubbed the "New Romantics." Marriage to the American writer Mitchell Goodman brought her to this country; they settled in New York City with summers in Maine, and their son Nickolai was born in 1949. The move to the U. S. immersed Denise in a very different poetic and cultural scene from what she had known. She quickly and deeply absorbed the American tradition, from the Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau to the formal experimentation of Ezra Pound and, especially William Carlos Williams, and in the process she re-made herself as a poet, and challenged American poetry to take account of that remaking.

In addition to more than 20 volumes of poetry-- ranging from her first American collection *Here and How* (1946) to *Sands of the Well* (1996), Denise published two volumes of translation, and four prose books of essays, mostly about poetry and politics, and autobiographical sketches. Her poems of the fifties and sixties won her immediate and excited recognition, not just from peers like Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan, but from the avant garde poets of an earlier generation like Kenneth Rexroth and William Carlos Williams himself. In their different ways they responded to her extraordinary gifts of diction and rhythm and structure, and her idiosyncractic fusion of

mystery and ordinariness. She was linked with the group of "Black Mountain" poets because they all published in *The Black Mountain Review*, edited by her friend Creeley.

The characteristic Levertov lyric was a surprising economy of words, suggestions and syntax. The reasoning was always spare. The images dispensed with logic sinuously and completely and the speaking voice had an uncanny conversational music, even while a tough argument might be developing under the surface. She had a broad poetic range. She shifted from tenderness to polemic to pastoral with grace and decision.

But to point out the lyric vision of Denise Levertov's poetry would be an incomplete emphasis without also recording how it darkened, became injured and turned with wounded power on the conduct of the Vietnam War. During the sixties and seventies, her poems were often a scalding critique of exploitation, waste and the plunder of the environment. Beginning in the mid-eighties her poems became more explicitly religious, and the mystery of the Christian Incarnation linked and grounded her sense of communal love and the continuous sacrament of experience.

Denise Levertov loved Stanford. She spoke to friends about the vitality of the students, their creative gifts; about moonrise on the Quad and the excellence of music at Dinkelspiel. Her papers are, very appropriately, in Green Library. The Levertov Archive in Special Collections stands as a major resource for scholars in modern poetry. And she is further commemorated in the Denise Levertov Poetry Prize, to be awarded annually from 1999, for the best undergraduate poem on the environment. In these ways, as well as through all the individual affections of memory, Stanford retains a treasured memory of her courage, her language, her unique witness to the art and honour of poetry.

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