

Ascent, Continuance, Immersion: Hope in the Poetry of Denise Levertov

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In her 1980s essay “Poetry, Prophecy, and Survival,” Denise Levertov declares that “the fate of the Earth lies in the balance as never before” (149). She writes further that “day by day powerful forces all over the globe are tipping that balance further towards extinction,” yet “we do not know that the worst is bound to happen; and that suspension in not knowing, bleak though it is, is the source of hope” (149). When asked if arts are a “collective cop-out” in the face of such issues, Levertov defends poetry: “hope also calls for witness, for the articulation poetic art . . . can give it” (147, 149).

To many of her critics, Levertov’s work fails at the tasks she finds necessary to the poetic articulation of hope, tasks such as “producing new forms and transforming existing ones” (145). Some readers doubt whether her poetic voice is still viable in a post-confessional milieu of experimental forms and whether her somewhat propagandistic political poetry achieves the artistic transformation she seeks.¹ Critics seem to

¹Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes that Levertov, in working with Western and patriarchal forms of consciousness and myth, only offers a “blurred shadow of a critique,” failing to break with the linear, given models and “re-envision the nature of [the] myth [of the feminine]” (219). Charles Altieri argues Levertov

intuit that hope plays a role in Levertov's work, but their assessments of the object of her poetic hope differ. Some have suggested that she hopes to revise patriarchal visions of femininity, others that she seeks to resist totalitarianism, still others that she desires simply to connect

that the hope Levertov offers from an aesthetic of personal presence is not good enough and cannot account for the complexity of the twentieth century, suggesting that "by locating most or all significant values in moments of [personal] vision, the poet has great difficulty constructing specific ethical values or moral images" and thus ends up falling prey to "flat" and "sentimental" details and "propagandistic phrases" (234). The poetry fails, despite its otherwise commendable technique, to provide hope through its anguish and praise, or, according to Altieri, it fails to "define the contemporary situation and provide values and images from the past one can use to judge and transcend it" (237–38). Though DuPlessis and Altieri are two relatively early critics of Levertov's work, more recent criticism continues to evaluate it in terms of its potential for hope and transformation. The big questions surrounding Levertov's *oeuvre* are the viability of her poetic voice in a post-confessional milieu and the value of her political protest poetry, which sometimes seems a falling off from her earlier virtuosity. Both of these questions touch on the major issue of whether the poetry can deal with and/or transcend the horrors it encounters in the twentieth century. Michael Davidson reads Levertov's later poetry as losing power against the "impossible contradictions" it encountered in the Vietnam War, suggesting she has lost "the meaning of poetry as a specific kind of expressive act where the language of power and domination, so common in political rhetoric, is no longer effective" in "pious and doctrinaire" work (555, 556).

²Critics more inclined to believe in Levertov's success also view her work according to its capacity to create possibility: Keith S. Norris writes that Levertov's poetry is postmodern and actually contributes to the survival of the lyric in a "post-nuclear age, when worldwide we are reminded of difference and of the inability to communicate beyond the general nastiness of self-assertion" by "creating a space where a poet can explore all options, both on the personal and social levels, in order to provide a means of political safe haven" and by "making connections that may help save us from the isolation and separateness that pervade our culture" (343); Donna K. Hollenberg writes that Levertov, concerned with the difficulty of the poetic "I" in the late twentieth century, turned to ekphrastic poems in order to "mirror and transcend the confusion and angst of a person caught in a world of catastrophe" in a

the self with disparate others.² The subject of hope in itself receives less attention. Yet Levertov's remarks on hope and her poems' links to hope-themed religious narratives prompt a conceptual examination of hope in her work, particularly in its Judeo-Christian theological contexts. Such an examination highlights her poetry's thematic and formal exploration of hope's foundational qualities: magnanimity and humility. When tracked in the themes and forms of several of her most important poems, these qualities shed light on Levertov's poetic, intellectual, and spiritual development.

THEOLOGICAL CONTEXTS FOR HOPE

The philosophical and theological understanding of hope that shapes such a reading of Levertov's work derives from sources ranging from Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas to Jürgen Moltmann. Religious sources in particular are made pertinent to Levertov's poetry by religious references in her work: poems refer to Judeo-Christian stories and even to a Christian understanding of *Heilsgeschichte*, or salvation history.³ Aquinas, who interprets Augustine and Aristotle (among others), along with his own interpreters is central in defining and under-

These and critics cited in the previous note intuit that some form of hope is at issue in Levertov's work, though their assessments of what Levertov's poetry may hope *for* differ: Davidson suggests it is language that resists war-mongering totalitarian power, DuPlessis a revision of prescribed courses of femininity, and Norris connection between disparate others. Yet all seem to weigh in on the effectiveness of hope, on whether Levertov has achieved expectation, critique, and transformation. The concept of hope itself in Levertov's writing is less the focus in these studies than is the thing hoped for, but in a writer whose work is markedly spiritual and, in later manifestations, religious and with such a critical confluence, to consider the way the concept of hope itself functions in Levertov's work makes sense.

³In addition, both Judaism and Christianity shape Levertov's background. She was a descendent of Schneour Zalman, "The Rav of Northern White Russia," who founded the Habad branch of Hasidic Judaism, and her father turned from Judaism to become an Anglican priest. Levertov experienced her own conversion—to Roman Catholicism—in 1984.

standing hope as a religious concept differentiated from secular definitions. Moltmann, Levertov's contemporary, who appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* for his *Theology of Hope* (1964) at the time of its English translation in 1967, in particular is known for his re-centering of New Testament theology in the Hebrew Bible's motif of promise. His merging of Jewish and Christian theologies makes his work seem especially suited to the task of theorizing a hope that helps readers see Levertov's poetic and spiritual development well.

Hope is traditionally understood as an expectation of a difficult-to-attain, but possible future good (Aquinas 1.2.40.1). This expectation, however, can be taken in both secular and sacred senses and is not to be simply understood in either. In Aristotle, hope is a somewhat fraught concept. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, the expectation of good, though helpful, might falsely inspire a person to optimism and thus override the need for the better virtue of a more realistic (though less hopeful) courage (Gravlee 463). Yet, as G. Scott Gravlee points out when tracking instances of hope throughout Aristotle, hope does have value to Aristotle in that "it underlies the confidence involved in both courage and natural high-mindedness, and it underlies the deliberation and self-confidence necessary both to improve one's circumstances and to cultivate the excellences of character" (477). For Aquinas, who in his *Summa Theologica* is intent on differentiating his understanding from both secular and prior Christian articulations, hope is one of the theological virtues, that is, a virtue with God himself as its principal object and enabler: "insofar as we hope for anything as being possible to us by means of the Divine assistance, our hope attains God Himself, on Whose help it leans. It is therefore evident that hope is a virtue, since it causes a human act to be good and to attain its due rule" (2.2.17.1). Less about what one may hope for oneself out of one's abilities, "the habit . . . of hope, whereby we hope to obtain [beatific] happiness, does not flow from our merits, but from grace alone" (2.2.17.1). It is, according to Moltmann, "forward looking and forward moving" and recognizes the unknowability and otherness of the things to come (16). For its expectation of the future, hope is not an escape to the sweet by-and-by: it is deeply involved in the project of transforming the present as it

moves toward the future. Moltmann claims that “hope’s statements of promise . . . must stand in contradiction to the reality which can at present be experienced. . . . They do not [only] seek to illuminate the reality which exists, but . . . to lead existing reality towards the promised and hoped-for transformation” (18). Aquinas, too, notes that the essence of hope makes it drive a person to action (1.2.40.8).

Hope is associated in Aristotle and Aquinas with the qualities of magnanimity—that is, a kind of highmindedness or greatness of mind—and humility. Magnanimity is related to hope because of hope’s focus on the good or noble and on the difficulty of its attainment. Aristotle argues in *On Rhetoric* that when people, particularly young people, have hope, they have self-confidence enough to work toward high, magnanimous goals:

And they are magnanimous; for they have not yet been worn down by life but are inexperienced with constraints, and to think oneself worthy of great things in magnanimity and this is characteristic of a person of good hopes. And they choose to do fine things rather than things advantageous [to themselves].
(2.12.1389a)

Aquinas writes that “magnanimity is immediately about the passions of hope, and mediately about honor as the object of hope” (2.2.129.1). Josef Pieper interprets this by suggesting that magnanimity “directs . . . hope to its true possibilities” (102). It allows people to work for expansion of the present into a hoped-for future; the extension of the individual self toward the community and the world; and ultimately the attainment of the beautiful, which state is certainly for Aquinas the only proper and highest hope (102). Yet Aquinas differentiates sharply between magnanimity and hope: “Magnanimity tends to something arduous in the hope of obtaining something that is within one’s power, wherefore its proper object is the doing of great things. On the other hand hope, as a theological virtue, regards something arduous, to be obtained by another’s help” (2.2.17.5). Thus, magnanimity requires as a balance a “moderating and restraining moral virtue . . . with regard to the difficult good,” namely, the restraining virtue of humility (2.2.161.2).

Humility, suggests Pieper, balances high aspirations and a proud participation in the hoped-for future and reveals “the limitations of possibilities,” which “preserves them from sham realization and for true realization” (102). Humility is an awareness of the hierarchical distance between human and God along with an awareness of the not-yet that characterizes human beings. Properly speaking, magnanimity and humility are not opposite, as “humility restrains the appetite from aiming at great things against right reason: while magnanimity urges the mind to great things in accord with right reason,” but together they guide a person to hope properly in God’s help (Aquinas 2.2.161.2).

As Moltmann maintains, hope’s negotiation between magnanimity and humility has a drastic effect on self-understanding. It does not lead a person in the present “to the haven of identity, but involves him in the tensions and differentiations . . . of mission and of self-emptying” (91). Hope leaves identity uncertain in those Aquinas calls “wayfarers,” though it does serve as an assurance in the one “whom I have believed” (2 Tim. 1:12). Humility thus decentralizes the self and the abilities of a person and makes a magnanimous vision of hope realistic.

Hope, then, is infused in humans from God and involves them as participators and responders rather than instigators or achievers. It recognizes the injustice and violence of the present, rejects them, and moves toward the hoped-for future. The hopeful person so moves, regulated and aimed toward the good by the qualities of humility and magnanimity.

ASCENT

The poetic “witness” hope “calls for” in a world of genocide first emerges as important in Levertov’s *The Jacob’s Ladder*, published in 1961 (Levertov “Poetry” 145). The volume moves from some of her earlier, neo-romantic works toward greater awareness of the outside political world, including, for instance, poems about the trial of Adolf Eichmann and the death of Osip Mandelstam. In the volume, two poems, “The Ladder” and “The Jacob’s Ladder,” both linked to the

story referred to in the volume's title, seem to offer a poetics of hopeful ascent to foreground the individual and poetic contribution to the creation and maintenance of hope.

The title of the volume comes, of course, from the story of Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28, which centers on Jacob's hope of future good. In the narrative the wanderer Jacob falls asleep in the wilderness and receives a vision of a stairway to heaven with God standing beside him. God promises Jacob the gift of a future with land and descendants, a desirable, arduous, and yet possible future good in which Jacob may hope. At first, Jacob is audacious—if God will bless him, protect him, and provide for him, then Jacob will accept Yahweh as his God. He learns through a long process what it means to trust God rather than his own efforts as the source of his promised end: he wrestles with God a few chapters later and is left with a disjointed hip and persistent limp to remind him that God's strength is superior to his own. Yet the blessing he receives through his wrestling efforts also affirms his forthright pursuit of the highest and best—that is, a pursuit of God himself.

In "The Ladder," the volume's first poem, Levertov uses the raw material of a Hasidic teaching on the Jacob's ladder story to foreground the ways that hope's desired end can prompt a person toward both personally willed, magnanimous ascent and an understanding of individual limitations. In the teaching each person is both Jacob and a Jacob's ladder. In both the teaching and the poem the ladder/person seems only to stand through an exquisitely paradoxical tension between the limited, replicable nature of human life and the vital importance and possibility of each person's intent and actions:

Rabbi Moshe (of Kobryn) taught:
It is written: "And he dreamed,
and behold a ladder set up on the
earth." That "he" is every man.
Every man must know: I am clay,
I am one of countless shards of clay,
but "the top of it reached to
heaven"—my soul reaches to heav-

en; “and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it”—even the ascent and descent of the angels depend on my deeds.

Tales of the Hasidim: Later Masters by
Martin Buber ([2])

The form of the poem establishes the themes and tensions of hope in several ways. The poem itself is shaped like a perfect ladder, its 1.5 line spacing providing space to imagine rungs, its double justification providing space to place stiles. Levertov had written to Robert Duncan during the few months prior to being asked to put together the book that would become *The Jacob's Ladder*, saying, “more and more I need a care for form in a poem for it to satisfy me—I need poems that have some sculptural quality—not that they should be static but that they should be solid bodies in movement” (Bertholf and Gelpi 266). This poem’s shape is sculptural yet also dynamic: reading it, one moves down the ladder. Its dynamism comes not only from the way one reads it, but also because it makes use of some of Charles Olson’s ideas in that each line contains an experience of imaginative perception that reaches directly toward the next. The way Levertov understands her craft, these dynamic sequences of perceptions become the form of the poem, which she calls its possibility or “horizon” (Levertov “Some” 69). In its dynamic ordering of her readers’ experience through sculpture and projective verse the poem makes reading itself a hopeful motion; it humbly descends yet in so doing moves also forward to the horizon of the poem.

Levertov also uses “the precision tool” of the linebreak; the emphasis implicitly residing in the end of each perception in “The Ladder” focuses readers on a balance between humility and magnanimity (“On” 62). In the first half of the poem, the line-ending words “man” and “clay” emphasize the earthly limitation of humankind. In the second half, magnanimous possibility comes to the fore: “to” (which leads to the next line’s “heav- / en” and thus imparts a tone of wonder), “heav-” (which in itself at the breaking of the line brings one forward to the

next) and “God”—all emphasize the possibility and promise of ascent. The poem has only one stanza break, between the statement and the citation; this makes the source into the ground and grounding of the work as well as the grounding of the ladder. Readers descend to the source in reading and then in it find both their humiliation and their exaltation. They are exalted in meaningful responsibility: the angels themselves depend on readers as the means of ascent.

The entire poem, even its title, is an exact quotation, except for the phrase “(of Kobryn),” from one of the *Tales of the Hasidim* (1947–48) collected by Martin Buber. In making the poem from another’s work, Levertov enacts a kind of humility, the submission of citation. Though she clearly puts her own sculptural pen and perceiving mind—the lines breaking at the completion of a reading/ perception, for example—to the shape of the poem, she centralizes a speaker other than herself, Rabbi Moshe, the Belarusian of Kobryn, who died in 1858. Levertov also submits to the speech of Martin Buber, who becomes, by being the ground of the poem, the first step by which one begins to ascend in hope.

Any mention of Buber of course recalls his famous I-Thou and rightly does here as well. Buberian philosophy calls an individual to look at the other and say “you” to him or her, and the saying of “you” mingles humility and aspiration: it subordinates the self yet insists that the possibility of the other can be reached.⁴

While balancing or seeking a balance between humility and magnanimity, this poem certainly does not evaluate the worth and efficacy of the individual’s actions. In that sense, it considers hope to be something more personally willed and enacted. The emphasis on “my deeds” as the ostensible last phrase of the poem perhaps reminds readers that Aquinas differentiates between magnanimity as a virtue focusing on what is within one’s own power and hope as a virtue focusing on what may be obtained through another’s, i.e., God’s, help and grace. In that light, this poem reads more magnanimously than hopefully.

⁴Levertov takes up the theme of reaching in “A Solitude,” a later poem in

While “The Ladder” does not explicitly offer a *poetics* of hope or an assessment of hope, that language can provide the poetic stress on the words “taught” and “written” suggests that the “deeds” on which the ascent and descent of angels are dependent might have something to do with the task of the writer. The book’s title poem, “The Jacob’s Ladder,” more thoroughly exemplifies a vision of hopeful ascent in relationship to poetry. The poem emerges out of Levertov’s experience at the Church of Santo Domingo, in Oaxaca, Mexico, when she looked at what she called a “primitive” painting of Jacob’s dream (MacGowan 100):

The stairway is not
a thing of gleaming strands
a radiant evanescence
for angels’ feet that only glance in their tread, and need not
touch the stone.

It is of stone.
A rosy stone that takes
a glowing tone of softness
only because behind it the sky is a doubtful, a doubting
night gray.

A stairway of sharp
angles, solidly built.
One sees that the angels must spring
down from one step to the next, giving a little
lift of the wings:

and a man climbing
must scrape his knees, and bring
the grip of his hands into play. The cut stone
consoles his groping feet. Wings brush past him.
The poem ascends. (37)

This poem demonstrates through its form and themes its vision of hope: the ascent to transcendence through personally willed engagement with the world. The first stanza shifts poetry's goal from visionary experience, something Levertov's early work is known for, to interaction and encounter with the physically concrete world as a foundation for ascent. Several words—"gleaming," "evanescence," and "glance"—suggest the briefest, most magical understandings of Jacob's ladder. Such a ladder would provide support only for angels who, the line break between lines four and five emphasizes, have no needs: "for angels' feet that only glance in their tread, and need not / touch the stone." Yet under the force of the perception-by-perception exposition that the poem creates, the last line of the first stanza becomes a command, an interruption to the magic: "Touch the stone!" The repetition of the word "stone" at the end of lines five and six inverts the anaphoric repetition of "a thing, a radiant." This epistrophe, when its effect is combined with that of the period at the ends of both lines, slows readers down after the anaphora of the previous lines has sped them up. Thus, readers are hurried through the magical vision and then brought to a halt in an encounter with the physical world. The ladder, the means by which the man ascends, is made of "cut stone," which may perhaps be a reference to concrete poetry, for the poem, like such poetry, actually suggests the shape of its subject: the ziggurat shape said by biblical scholars to be the form of Jacob's ladder. The poem's diction suggests effort: angles challenge angels and work and injury must be suffered to climb the stone staircase. The diction also, however, emphasizes the need to become childlike. The language of scraping knees, the requirement that the man change the orientation of his hands from grasping to recreational play, and the need for consolation intimate not a triumphant processional but a living, humble, physical process.

The man's goal, however, is still to transcend, to approach heaven, which location, according to Aquinas, is the ultimate object of hope. Yet this poem audaciously revises the biblical story's version of hope. In the Bible Jacob never climbs the ladder to heaven nor achieves any willed interaction with God; though he is said to be a grasper from

birth, Jacob's limitations are evident. In the poem the man climbing apparently triumphs over what physical limitations may be his portion; he in fact relies on those limitations as the means to ascent, while earthly stone comforts him on the way to the heavenly kingdom.

The poetic epiphany of the last line is partly that in the ascendance of the man, the poem also ascends; the sudden mention of poetry reads rather like a surprise ending in a mystery novel that prompts an immediate re-read to see how the details of the text work together. The poem by that means creates ascent, as one almost automatically lifts one's eyes to the beginning to try to determine how the man climbing has become the poet, how the encounter with rough, tangible stone and materials makes a poem approach transcendent power and possibility in the real language of the world. Levertov's form moves these moments forward and moves her readers with them through humility and aspiration into hope.

Ascendant hope in these two poems involves magnanimous goals of personal, transcendent experience achieved through the humility required of physical, human existence in the world. This humility seems to consist of acknowledgment of human space and location, perhaps more along the lines of the etymology of the word "humble"—from the Latin *humus*, meaning "ground" or "earth"—rather than, say, a self-abasing acknowledgment of the hierarchical distance between humans and the transcendent. On the whole, the hopeful vision of ascent suggests that human locatedness and embodiment can be a means to the transcendent. Many of the poems in *The Jacob's Ladder* evince this poetics of ascent, even when not explicitly dealing with hope or hopeful religious narratives, by putting in proximity seemingly disparate elements, suggesting, for instance, the interrelationships between visits with muses and urban landscapes or between the glory of music and getting up from the toilet. In this way magnanimity and humility combine to produce hope in Levertov's early work.

CONTINUANCE

When Levertov's eighth book, *Relearning the Alphabet*, appeared in

1970, she had begun to need a poetic hope that, in Moltmann's words, would "stand in contradiction to the reality which can at present be experienced" (18). She began to need a poetry that explicitly rejected present injustice and aimed at rhetorically moving people toward the hoped-for future, "not [only] seek[ing] to illuminate the reality which exists, but . . . to lead existing reality towards the promised and hoped-for transformation" (18). Yet even the explicitness of her newly forged anti-war poetry failed at times to sustain hope, especially as the war in Vietnam continued, and her husband's trial for conspiracy to undermine the draft approached. In such conditions, *The Jacob's Ladder's* assurance that imaginative interaction with the physical world could achieve transcendence for the poet and poem may have seemed less and less satisfactory. For instance, in "The Cold Spring," the second poem in *Relearning the Alphabet*, Levertov asks what would happen "[i]f I should find my poem is deathsongs / If I find it has ended, when / I looked for the next step" (8). "Biafra," which finds the poet looking at photos of children dying, trails into silence, foregrounding the silent space of the blank page by ending the poem with a colon and a blank space: "And know / no hope: Don't know / what to do: Do nothing:" (18). Perhaps the next step of Jacob's ladder is missing, or the ladder abruptly ends here.

The volume's title poem, "Relearning the Alphabet," expresses these conditions as crises of linguistic hope as well as a crisis of poetic vocation. It presents in verse the debilitating fear that the epiphanic and neo-romantic vision of poetic ascent that had guided Levertov's aesthetic may not offer the true hope that more desperate times require. It also offers, instead, a hope different from ascendant hope, one willing to acknowledge that self-willed imaginative interaction with the world may not be enough, and that outside assistance is necessary to sustain hope. "Continuance," as "Relearning the Alphabet" calls it (112), is a kind of hope constituted in dogged, yet not independent, praxis.

The poem can be read well through a Hasidic legend about how the Rabbi Baal-Shem-Tov, Master of the Good Name, also known as the Besht, had to relearn the alphabet in order to restore hope to all

humanity. It is not certain whether Levertov knew this specific legend, though her education in the Hasidic masters through Buber is established by her citation in “The Ladder.” As Elie Wiesel retells the tale, the Besht

undertook an urgent and perilous mission: to hasten the coming of the Messiah. The Jewish people, all humanity were suffering too much, beset by too many evils. They had to be saved, and swiftly. For having tried to meddle with history, the Besht was punished; banished along with his faithful servant to a distant island. In despair, the servant implored his master to exercise his mysterious powers in order to bring them both home. “Impossible,” the Besht replied. “My powers have been taken from me.” “Then, please, say a prayer, recite a litany, work a miracle.” “Impossible,” the Master replied, “I have forgotten everything.” They both fell to weeping.

As the story goes, the master only finds hope and a way out of his situation by submitting himself to his servant, who, while forgetting almost everything, retains one crucial, fundamental memory:

Suddenly the Master turned to his servant and asked: “Remind me of a prayer—any prayer.” “If only I could,” said the servant. “I too have forgotten everything.” “Everything—absolutely every-thing?” “Yes, except—” “Except what?” “Except the alphabet.” At that the Besht cried out joyfully: “Then what are you waiting for? Begin reciting the alphabet and I shall repeat after you. . . .” And together the two exiled men began to recite, at first in whispers, then more loudly: “*Aleph, beth, gimel, dalet*. . . .” And over again, each time more vigorously, more fervently; until, ultimately, the Besht regained his powers, having regained his memory.

Thus, the servant recites the alphabet with the master repeating after him until memory and power and hope are restored.

The story illustrates that messianic hope involves the humility of submission to another: the Rabbi, in order to preserve hope, must give up his

role as Rabbi, becoming instead the pupil to the servant. The tale also presents an instance of language functioning itself as material hope, an expectation and possibility that establishes the hoped-for future. For the Rabbi and his servant the plain, unglamorous recitation of the alphabet restores memory and also generates the spiritual power that will continue the work of bringing the Messiah into the world. The repetition grounds hope in dogged perseverance made possible by a gift from outside the self and the humility of submission to that other's gift. These generate the power to respond to globally scaled needs.

Levertov's poem invokes themes similar to those in the story of the Besht, particularly repetition (or continuance) of language as material hope and the surrender of personal will or authority as necessary to the restoration of hope. Also, since Levertov's long poem is divided into twenty-three sections, each headed by a letter or two, with the last section, "Z," repeating a portion of the "A" section, the poem mimics the Hebrew alphabet of twenty-two letters, making the twenty-third section a return to the first.

A

Joy—a beginning. Anguish, ardor.
To relearn the ah! of knowing in unthinking
joy: the beloved stranger lives.
Sweep up anguish as with a wing-tip,
brushing the ashes back to the fire's core.

B

To be. To love an other only for being.

C

Clear, cool? Not those evasions. The seeing
that burns through, comes through to
the fire's core. (110-11)

The opening section declares that even in the midst of the joy of beginning a poem the poet is, like the Besht, in "[a]nguish, [and] ardor"

without the poetic epiphany and intuition, that “ah! of knowing in unthinking” that had guided her experience in moving through the world into transcendent poetry. Sections “B” and “C” identify the poem as a quest: the poet seeks renewed vision and purpose for her poetry, particularly “the seeing / that burns through, comes through to / the fire’s core,” and the love that would make that “seeing” possible. These require a clarity of vision the poem calls “caritas, claritas” in section “K,” which means terms of the quest associated with leaping a great river “to enter a life not mine” in section “I, J” (113, 112).

As in the story of the Besht, “Relearning the Alphabet” grounds the hope of continued poetic output in the basics of vocalized language, particularly the generative interplay of consonant and vowel sounds. In sections “D,” “E,” and “F,” for instance, the poem revolves around the letters of the section titles:

D

In the beginning was delight. A depth
stirred as one stirs fire unthinking.
Dark dark dark . And the blaze illumines
dream.

E

Endless
returning, endless
revolution of dream to ember, ember to anguish,
anguish to flame, flame to delight,
delight to dark and dream, dream to ember

F

that the mind’s fire may not fail.
The *vowels of affliction*, of unhealed
not to feel it, uttered,
transformed in utterance
to song.

Not farewell, not farewell, but faring (111)

The lines' repeated sounds are not mere alliteration; Levertov's word choice indicates that the sound repetition and return are a "revolution." At first, she finds this revolution a spinning out of control: the gentle progression of the alphabet—D to E to F—becomes D to E to A to F to D. Yet as the word "ember" contains dual significance as both the approaching death of fire and the potential for its renewal, so the term "revolution" contains both the chaotic spin of Yeats's "widening gyre" (1640) and the positive change that would allow both poet and her creation to move toward the future. As the opening letters of the words settle from their erratic shifts into the progression of "dream to ember // F / that the mind's fire may not fail," the poem embraces the possibility that the mere revolution of reciting the alphabet will become a transformation of pain to poetry and from the resignation of separation to the hope of the journey.

Yet also like the story of the Besht, the poet's search to regain hope in "Relearning the Alphabet" is only accomplished through a humbling process. In section "I, J" the poet must become "a small figure in mind's eye, / diminishing in the sweep of rain or gray tears" through errant questing—starts, stops, and retracings of steps—and through coming to understand that the object of the quest (willed poetic epiphany and resultant social revolution) was wrong in the first place (113). The poem traces at least three separate returns and restarts in the journey, each of which acknowledges a need for perseverance, humility, or help from outside. The first return in section "I, J" acknowledges the false desire to cross over, to achieve transcendence: "Into the world of continuance, to find / I-who-I-am again, who wanted / to enter a life not mine / to leap a wide, deep, swift river" (112). Instead of being able to cross that river, the pilgrim/poet remains at the edge and then turns,

 . . . stumbling
 (head turned)
 back to my origins:
(if that's where I'm going)
 to joy, my Jerusalem. (112)

The use of the letter “J” and the word “joy” here actually prompt readers back to the first word of the poem. The poet starts again in section “L,” after being “Lost in the alphabet,” when help from the outside restores enough hope to keep going: a friend (in this case Isak Dinesin) “call[s]” her “forth” “by the love in a question” (114). After the calling forth comes another return. After desiring “to touch / the moon” and finding all the luminosity it represents merely “cold” and “half” (114), the poet makes a “humbled” return home—“I am / come back, / humbled, to warm myself”—to the repetitive, physical love of marriage in section “M” (115). Here, too, the gift of repetition, in this case the repetitive kiss goodnight, that allows for a sense of warmth, comes from someone outside the self, presumably the writer Mitchell Goodman, Levertov’s husband: “your mouth / has found / my mouth once more” (115). The third stop and restart occur when the poet acknowledges the potentially hubristic childhood desire always to be the quester and not the quarry; she finds, however, that she has to “relinquish / in grief” the object of her quest: “*the seeing that burns through, comes through / to the fire’s core*” and is able through the “transformation” to be not always the lover but the beloved as well in section “R” (117). Again, return, repetition, and continuance are the source of hope—a hope given from the outside: the figure of the “Prince” comes in section “S,” not to rescue Levertov but to recommend that she “Retrace / thy steps, seek out / the hut you passed, impatient, / the day you lost your quarry” (117). Her lack of patience, her forcing of both poetry and transformation, has led her astray and requires again a return.

As in the story of the Besht, almost everything is lost in the quest presented in “Relearning the Alphabet”: in section “K” the poet realizes that the goal of “seeing” “*Through to the fire’s core*” is, like “alchemy,” unrealistic; the clarity she had hoped for is not available to her:

K

Caritas is what I must travel to.

Through to the fire’s core,

an alchemy:
 caritas, claritas.
But find my face clenched
when I wake at night
 in limbo. (113)

The quest for the “knowing,” “unthinking” love that would turn into a clear “seeing” is found to be “an alchemy” and something that cannot be reached in the waking world of “limbo.”

By section “R” the poet has to give up her goal:

 And relinquish
 in grief
the seeing that burns through, comes through
to fire's core. (117)

The poet’s discovery in all these wanderings is that the will is unable to achieve the high dream of “seeing . . . through to fire’s core,” as in section “S”: “In-seeing / to candleflame’s / blue ice-cavern, measureless, // may not be forced by sharp desire” (117). Instead, as seen in the quest stops and restarts above, perception and the hope that comes from it emerge from a source outside the self.

The end of the poem finds the poet giving up the very object of her search and finding that perseverance—what the poem calls “continuance”—the state of the world—is the proper response to the will’s failure to achieve “seeing” without thinking. The poet finds instead that

 All utterance
takes me step by hesitant step towards

T
—yes, to continuance: into
 that life beyond the dead-end where
(in a desert time of
dry strange heat, of dust
that tinged mountain clouds with copper,

the turn of the year impending unnoticed,
the cactus shadows brittle thornstars,
time of
desolation)

I was lost. (118)

Here the poet even realizes that the glory of epiphany, a means to poetic transcendence, is interrupted by the next letter. Perhaps there is no epiphany, only the repeating of letters; yet this basic perseverance, even in its bareness, is still a “life beyond the dead-end.” It is certainly no seeing “through to the fire’s core” but could be thought to represent a different kind of hope—“not what the will / thinks to construct for its testimonies” (119). Levertov’s (then future) statement that hope requires a witness and testimony in language seems strangely resonant here, especially given that hope’s testimony is markedly different in 1970 with “Relearning the Alphabet” from what it was in 1961 with “The Jacob’s Ladder.” In “Relearning the Alphabet” it is a testimony in which the job of the viewer is, as the poem says in section “U,” to

Relearn the alphabet,
relearn the world, the world
understood anew only in doing, understood only as
looked-up into out of earth,
the heart and eye looking,
the heart a root
planted in earth.
Transmutation is not
under the will’s rule. (119)

But Levertov finds that the transcendence of “seeing . . . through to fire’s core” or passing over the river into a life ascendant or transcendent is not hope-making. It cannot be done, for one thing, and would not be sufficient if it could, for another. Hope requires the humility of continuance and an acknowledgment that something outside the self is necessary for its preservation. What the poet used to see as the proper end of the poetic vocation, the transmutation of the world through per-

fect vision, is, according to section “U,” “not / under the will’s rule.” Instead, as section “V” states,

Vision sets out
journeying somewhere,
walking the dreamwaters:
arrives
not on the far shore but upriver,
a place not evoked, discovered. (119)

And the important discovery made in section “Z” is of the “other: the present,” rather than the presence—a gift given from outside, “that which was poised already in the ah! of praise” (120).

In this last phrase of the poem, the discovery of “the ah!”—as in “ah ha!”—that opens it is refigured, perhaps even transformed (hope against hope), into an “ah! of praise.” This transformation, which emerges largely because of the humbling repetition in which the poem is engaged, is indeed an exciting step toward hope that privileges the raising of the other rather than the raising of the self. For the most part, though, one does not see any praise in the poem. “Relearning the Alphabet” is a poem of desperation, sunk in self-journeying and self-examination, where the poet/quester is humbled again and again in the dilemma of diminished hope.

The magnanimity in this poem is constituted less by grand aspirations, as were present in “The Jacob’s Ladder” and “The Ladder,” than by a chastened yet courageous poetic mode of continuance. Continuance has in it some of the same sense of ascent in that through interaction with the world poetic language makes discoveries, is able to see into the other, and may praise. Continuant hope, though, focuses more on the fundamental necessity to persevere for the sake of what is discovered rather than what is desired and evoked than does a poetics of ascent. The difference in poem lengths might offer an illustration of the difference between the hopes offered in ascent and continuance: the shimmering ladder is short in “The Ladder” and “The Jacob’s Ladder,” but the road is very long in “Relearn-

ing the Alphabet.” Levertov writes in sections “S” and “T” that “All utterance / takes me step by hesitant step towards / / T / yes, to continuance” (118). In these lines she finds that the words she writes are not just moving “towards” “continuance,” but that they *are* “continuance”: each word written enacts hope by continuing in hope.

IMMERSION

Continuance and ascent, particularly the ways in which they work to enact humility and magnanimity in the search for hope, end up guiding much of Levertov’s work in the 1970s and 1980s. They circumscribe periods of intense doubt regarding poetic vocation and the possibilities of language. Yet the poetic possibilities offered in visions of ascent and continuance, despite their work toward humility, still mostly come from the self and center on the self. Life events such as divorce cause an intense self-focus in Levertov’s poetry, committed though it is to political activism. In *Life in the Forest* (1978), Levertov writes that her encounter with the work of Cesare Pavese challenged her with regard to self-centeredness; after reading his *Lavorare Stanca* (1936), Levertov comments that “Pavese’s beautiful poems are about various persons other than himself; though he is a presence in them also, their focus is definitely not autobiographical and egocentric” (“Introductory” vii). She dedicates a series of poems to Pavese in *Life in the Forest* that deals with subjects other than herself; one does sense throughout, however, her continuing need to interpret the other in terms and images of the self. Even as she writes of the death of an old woman in “Death in Mexico,” she describes the woman as “an alien here, / as I am” (33).

Yet Levertov’s poem “Immersion” from *This Great Unknowing: Last Poems* (1999) represents another assessment of the hope possible for language and the poetic vocation, one that might be said to have been developing since her conversion poem, “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus.” This is not a radical break: on the one hand Levertov writes luminous personal lyrics until the end of her life, and on the other, she had worked to achieve a poetic articulation of humility since

the beginning of her career. Yet, as Robert Creeley interprets Levertov's conversion in his preface to her *Selected Poems* (2002), her entrance into the Roman Catholic church marks her trying "to come into a company, a gathering of all, a determined yielding of . . . distinction and isolating privilege" (xv). If Creeley's estimation is at all right, then her move into a formal community of faith is directly related to her search for hope through increased humility.

Oddly enough, it is through faith's most faithful prod, doubt, that humility and other-focus come most to the fore in creating a sustaining, realistic hope in Levertov's later work. In the "Kyrie" of "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus," she writes,

Yet our hope lies
in the unknown,
in our unknowing.

O deep, remote unknown,
O deep unknown,
Have mercy upon us. (109)

In this section, the first line break is most telling. Elsewhere, Levertov writes that hope comes from the fact that one does not know that the worst is bound to happen ("Poetry" 149). The primary meaning of the stanza above is just that: hope comes from not knowing. Yet the break after "lies" also draws attention to the alternate meaning of the word, a meaning more fully outlined in the "Angus Dei" section of the poem. The hope that belongs to a person, "our hope," tells what is not true when it offers the wrong vision of hope as escape to what one does not know yet—heaven: "we . . . in shamefaced private hope / had looked to be plucked from fire and given / a bliss we deserved for having imagined it" (114). Levertov works toward the hope that can have mercy even for the doubter and finds it in her own willingness to become like Mary or any other human rather than in being solely herself. She submits— "So be it" (115)—to the Lamb that might "suppose there is milk to be found in us" and in the collective manner of the

mass agrees that the congregation should “hold to our icy hearts / a shivering God” (114). Yet all this is done through question and hesitation.

“Immersion” was one of the last poems Levertov wrote; at her death it had not yet been published. It perhaps most finally expresses her growth into a conversational, questioning understanding of hope as gift from God:

There is anger abroad in the world, a numb thunder,
because of God’s silence. But how naïve,
to keep wanting words we could speak ourselves,
English, Urdu, Tagalog, the French of Tours,
The French of Haiti . . .

Yes, that was one way omnipotence chose
to address us—Hebrew, Aramaic, or whatever the patriarchs
chose in their turn to call what they had heard. Moses
demanded the word, spoken and written. But perfect freedom
assured other ways of speech. God is surely
patiently trying to immerse us in a different language,
events of grace, horrifying scrolls of history
and the unearned retrieval of blessing lost for ever,
the poor grass returning after drought, timid, persistent.
God’s abstention is only from human dialects. The holy voice
Utters its woe and glory in myriad musics, in signs and portents.
Our own words are for us to speak, a way to ask and to answer. (53)

In this poem, Levertov’s system of lineation is simpler than in much of her other work: the lines are longer—perhaps indicating a greater perceptual field—and the form does not direct readers as much as it does in other poems. Here one sees hope as a gift from God. It is not produced even through self-negotiated continuance but is “the unearned retrieval of blessing lost / the poor grass returning after drought, timid, persistent.” Transcendent hope with its facets of “woe and glory” is God’s voice in the world, rather than the poet’s voice in the position of oracle to the world. The one who immerses the poet

in the world is not the ambitious poet but God. The poet is not responsible for “the ascent and descent of the angels” (“Ladder” [2]), as in “The Ladder,” nor for ascending hope at all. Neither is the poet responsible to fuel continuance. The poet is responsible to do what in the poet’s estimation language can do: “speak . . . ask and . . . answer” (“Immersion” 53).

It may appear that in this poem one hears the work-worn voice of an ill poet whose hopes for her own career and for what poetry can accomplish are dulled when faced with an approaching, if uncertain, death. When crafting her last poems, Levertov was aware of them as some of the last to which she would put pen. Certainly, this vision of hope seems somehow less resplendent or excited about the power of the poet than do earlier visions of ascent or even the romance of continuance. Yet “Immersion,” in refiguring the human person and poet as immersed in the language of God, seems out of all these visions of hopeful poetry most to ascertain the humility and magnanimity that Levertov has implicitly sought all along. If human power is yet more diminished in the poem, the power and mystery of the divine presence are no less—indeed, they are more—than they have been in earlier visions. Further, by separating the human voice from the divine voice, human language is dignified in purpose: it is given the ability both to question and respond. Rather than being a means of vision and insight, a truly hopeful poetic language is a means of connection and response when one is summoned by God or by those who speak human dialects.

Levertov’s work seems to have grown in hope over the course of her spiritual development—perhaps doubt led her in some ways to hope in God. Early models should not be taken as stages she gets beyond entirely, nor should later models be seen as radically different from earlier work. Rarely do Levertov’s journeys happen on such straight paths. It may even be that the seeds of asking and answering Levertov finds in “Immersion” to be the true purposes of a hopeful poetic language are accomplished in an earlier religious poem, “The Avowal.” As in her

⁵“The Avowal” was written for Carolyn Kizer and John Woodbridge in remembrance of their celebration of George Herbert’s three-hundredth birthday in

future poem “Immersion,” “The Avowal” asks a question of God and readers: how can I let go of control when I have always been the one to make things happen? And it becomes an answer as well, a response to friends and literary ancestors:⁵

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace. (76)

In seeking to express the paradox of how one might dare to fall, the poem spatially enacts the fall it seeks. It discovers perhaps that even the ending depths of a fall can leave the poet surrounded in the transcendent grace that had been the one thing needful since her first designs at ascent.

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