

Denise Levertov: Work that enfaiths

by [Kathleen Norris](#) in the [February 17, 1999](#) issue

I will never forget the first time I heard Denise Levertov read her poetry. In the late 1960s, when I was a fledgling writer in New York, I was thrilled to hear a poet I had found on my own in high school. As was the custom, Levertov was paired with a younger poet, one whose first book had garnered some attention in the literary world. The reading demonstrated that the younger poet's poems were fool's gold. She prefaced each one with a lengthy explication that made the poem seem like an anticlimax. These off-the-cuff stories were much livelier than the poems themselves, and I could see (or rather, hear) that the poems were mostly air, buoyed by a shallow cleverness and wit.

By the time Levertov had read one poem, I felt as if I had been offered a glass of cold, clear spring water. It was poetry, commanding attention in the way that scripture does. Her words had authority. These words were a gift, inviting me to respond with my whole heart.

It would be years before Levertov would reaffirm the Christian faith in which she had been raised by a Welsh mother and a father who had converted from Orthodox Judaism and become an Anglican priest. In the last few years of her life she became a Roman Catholic. But from childhood on, her poet's ear had been trained in the language of the psalms and liturgy. Her fierce commitment to the integrity of words enabled her to express equally fierce political commitments in her verse without diminishing its aesthetic quality. That is a rare gift.

Levertov, in both her life and work, epitomizes the poet's path to religious formation. As she revealed in a 1990 essay titled "Work That Enfaiths," even when she remained in doubt as to the truth of the Christian vision, she had faith in what Keats called the work of the imagination. And in her long apprenticeship as a poet she came to see that the one discipline prepared her for the other. She speaks of learning to follow a lead "both in the decisions of a day and in the word-by-word, line-by-line decisions of a poem in the making" and in the process discovering "certain analogies, and also interaction, between the journey of art and the journey

of faith."

In a 1984 essay, "A Poet's View," she said that the "acknowledgement, and celebration, of mystery probably constitutes the most consistent theme of my poetry. . ."

Because it is a matter of which I am conscious, it is possible, however imprecisely, to call it an intellectual position; but it is one which emphasizes the incapacity of reason alone (much though I delight in elegant logic) to comprehend experience, and considers Imagination the chief of human faculties. It must therefore be by the exercise of that faculty that one moves toward faith, and possibly by its failure that one rejects it as delusion. Poems present their testimony as circumstantial evidences, not as closing argument. Where Wallace Stevens says, "God and the imagination are one," I would say that the imagination, which synergizes intellect, emotion and instinct, is the perceptive organ through which it is possible, though not inevitable, to experience God.

In the 1980s she began composing a lengthy poem, a "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus" (doubting Thomas), as an aesthetic exercise, reasoning that if so many musical composers had mined the structure of the mass for their art, she could do so in a poem. Several months into the process, "when I had arrived at the Agnus Dei, I discovered myself to be in a different relationship to the material and to the liturgical form. . . . The experience of writing the poem--the long swim through waters of unknown depth--had been also a conversion process."

Levertov never lost her political edge. Both in poetry and prose she wrote eloquently and prophetically of the suffering of the innocent, "the global panorama of oppression and violence" that assaults anyone who reads a newspaper. But she could also write of a God who "remains nailed to the cross--for the very nature of God as love would be violated by taking back the gift of choice which is our very nature."

Levertov was a disciplined and prolific writer, and we have been blessed in recent years to have her *New and Selected Essays*, in which "A Poet's View" and "Work That Enfaiths" appear, along with a luminous selection of childhood memoirs, *Tesserae*. Among her recent books of poetry are *The Life Around Us*, *Sands of the Well* and *Evening Train*. In the year she died, 1997, she collected a group of her religious

poems for *The Stream and the Sapphire*.