The range of point of view in the poetry of Denise Levertov.

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THE RANGE OF POINT OF VIEW IN THE POETRY OF DENISE LEVERTOV

BY

Dianne Berkeley

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the Department of English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at The University of Windsor

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Dedications

With deep appreciation to Dr. T. Dilworth, my Chairman, for his thoughtful and painstaking criticism and suggestions.

Dedicated to Zeke and my family with thanks for their patient and helpful support throughout the writing of this thesis.
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Denise Levertov published her first book of poetry, *The Double Image*, in England in 1946. Since then, while living in the United States, she has published thirteen other volumes of poetry. Her name has become associated with the Black Mountain School of Poetry and particularly with Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, and Charles Olson. Her poetry is very well known in the States and widely acclaimed. She is the only visible woman poet of the Black Mountain School.

Unlike many of her female contemporaries, such as Adrienne Rich and Erica Jong, who are attempting to formulate a feminist tradition of poetry, Levertov remains firmly rooted in a non-feminist tradition. As Suzanne Juhasz comments, referring to Levertov and other feminine poets, Levertov writes out of a feminine experience:

They use, to a greater or lesser degree, their feminine experience as a source for poetry because it has been their own experience, but not to raise consciousness about women.

In this thesis, I intend to discuss the range of viewpoint in Levertov's poetry. I believe that her point of view is basically one of removal from or displacement of the experience she writes about. However, different poetic concerns evoke different techniques. In order to examine her variety of points of view, I have divided this thesis into four chapters, each one reflecting a different concern. Her principal concerns are the family, sexual life, the creative process and the Vietnam War. These topics do not completely encompass the wide range of Levertov's subject matter. They are her main concerns, however, and they do serve as a useful basis on which to examine Levertov's range of point of view.
Levertov often uses the narrative "I" in a manner which suggests that the voice in her poems is her own voice. Therefore, Levertov's point of view as a poet is intimately linked to Levertov the woman. Point of view is always, in some sense, personal and therefore sexual. Writers generally shy away from a gender-based analysis of their work. Many of them claim to be artistically androgynous, which seems to imply a universality of theme and style. Ms. Levertov makes a different claim, but for similar reasons. On October 13, 1979, at a Poetry Conference at Michigan State University, I asked her, "Do women poets write in a different manner in terms of subject matter and imagery than their male counterparts?" Ms. Levertov responded with an emphatic no, and went on to state: "Creativity transcends gender." I believe this statement reveals Levertov's fear of being categorized as a feminist poet. An examination of her work suggests, however, that she is very much a female poet.

The femininity of Levertov as a poet may be approached through the traditional metaphor of poetic inspiration. The poet is inspired by the female muse. In her essay, "The Imperious Muse," Pamela Di Pesa states:

...long after the belief in divine influence on the poet had disappeared, the Muse lived on as a symbol of whatever forces inspired or moved him.

It should be mentioned that "feminine" is intended as a political term and "female" is intended as having to do only with gender.
There appears to be a complex relationship between the poet and his muse which has a certain amount of sexuality attached to it.

The female poet faces a dilemma in regard to this concept: how does a female poet relate to a female muse? Obviously, the female poet would have enormous difficulty in relating to and responding to a female muse, for the muse is a personification of femininity and an extension, therefore, of herself. For her, the muse lacks the quality of separateness which has traditionally made the muse a symbol of inspiration.

The idea of a male muse at first appears absurd. Yet when we examine the work of a male oriented female poet such as Levertov, the idea ceases to seem so ludicrous. Levertov frequently prefaced her poems with a quote from a rabbi, or famous poets such as Wordsworth, Boris Pasternak, or one of her peers from the Black Mountain School such as Robert Creeley or Robert Duncan. The men in her personal life seem also to be muse-figures. Her love poems are obviously inspired by a man, frequently her husband, Mitchell Goodman. After their divorce, there appears a selection of erotic poetry dedicated to her current lover - "Jon". Her spiritual poetry has a strong Jewish influence which is probably due to her father being a Jew who later became an Anglican clergyman. Even her famous "Olga" poems, dedicated to the memory of her dead sister, have a pervasive Hasidic tone.

It is easy to trace the pervasive influence of the male as an inspirational figure in her work, whether in the guise of her father, son, husband, male ancestors, or living and dead male poets.
Levertov's position is rather paradoxical: she is a woman poet who writes about female experiences in the masculine tradition of Pound and Williams. Her point of view is distinctly feminine, that is, connected to her own experiences as a woman, while her style is rooted in the primarily masculine tradition. In order to grant a universal meaning to her experiences as a woman, moreover, she tends to generalize these experiences. By doing this, she solves the inherent contradiction of a female poet entrenched in a male tradition. Juhasz comments on this aspect of Levertov's poetry:

Levertov, whose work derives most directly from the masculine tradition, frequently needs to abstract and generalize upon the greater significance of an experience to grant it the desired validity.

In Levertov's poetry, point of view is conditioned by two aspects: first, there is little authorial extinction in that masks are rarely used; second, the experiences of a woman are generalized to convey a more universal significance. Ralph J. Mills Jr. comments on the disavowal by Levertov and her contemporaries of Eliot's concept of objectivity where the author is disguised in his work and therefore removed from it: "...The idea of mask...has no value for these younger poets, who really walk naked, as Yeats said poets should."

If point of view is personal, it is also connected to technique. Levertov's poetics are those of organic form: that is, she believes there is an order in the universe which poetry should reflect. The form of the poem takes shape in terms of the experience motivating the poem. In his essay, "Technique As Discovery", Mark Schorer expresses
ideas very similar to Levertov's concept that the poem's format corresponds closely to its motivating idea. Schorer writes that "technique is the only means the writer has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, conveying its meaning, and, finally, evaluating it." 6

Schorer defines technique in two ways:

...the uses to which language, as language, is put to express the quality of the experience in question...and the uses of point of view, not only as a mode of dramatic delimitation, but more particularly, of thematic definition. 7

The conclusion to be drawn from this definition is that point of view is a function of technique and integral to the meaning of a poem. Levertov's technique, while closely following the Black Mountain School of organic form, often demonstrates a dramatic range of point of view to reinforce, or discover, her themes.

Most theoretical discussion of point of view has been done by critics of prose fiction. The classic statement of the importance of consistent, coherent point of view is by Henry James:

There is no economy of treatment without an adopted, a related point of view, and though I understand, under certain degrees of pressure, a represented community of vision between several parties to the action when it makes for concentration, I understand no breaking-up of the register, no sacrifice of the recording consistency, that doesn't rather scatter and weaken.
Within this required consistency is a wide range of possible tones and effects, however. A writer can move between showing and telling, to use the terms of the famous controversy, without violating point of view. Norman Friedman discusses this basic conflict which is related to point of view: "...the writer is torn continually between the difficulty of showing what a thing is and the ease of telling how he feels about it." 9 As Norman Friedman indicates, point of view is "a way of distinguishing possible degrees of authorial extinction in the narrative art." 10 Levertov's poems are characterized by such variety of view point, which gives them a richness and flexibility that engages the reader in various ways and at different psychological levels. She often uses a personal view point, which engages the reader on the level of intellectual or political opinion and argument. She also adopts a mythic voice, which displaces point of view and engages the reader at a deeper psychological level. And as she develops as a poet, she alternates these voices with a third voice, which I will call the lyrical mode and which seems a compromise between or synthesis of the personal and the mythic voices.

It should be noted that the order of poems discussed in this thesis does not represent a particular progression in topic or in voice.
References


7. Ibid., p. 67.


10. Ibid., p. 112.
In this chapter I will examine poems that are concerned with the poet’s role as a family member in order to relate Levertov’s female point of view to her familial voice. Poems using the familial voice occur in seven of her eleven volumes. This is a significant percentage and suggests that Levertov is frequently conscious of the importance of family relationships as an integral part of her experience as a woman. This voice encompasses three roles: those of sister, mother, and daughter. The intensity of the familial poems indicates Levertov’s preoccupation with the relationships within a family. Without exception, these relationships are dealt with very traditionally, from a distinctly feminine point of view. There is not an echo of feminist resentment against the confines of the family. Levertov celebrates the complex inter-relationships of the family structure, rather than denigrating them, or suggesting a revolutionary re-assessment of their limitations. She is obviously writing from a traditionally female point of view which perceives the role of a woman as essentially nurturing and protective, whether the voice is that of sister, mother, or daughter. Levertov’s point of view is intimately connected to the speaker’s self which is the focus of emphasis in these poems.

Levertov’s complex relationship with her dead sister, Olga, is explored in four poems: "A Lamentation", "Olga Poems", "A Note to Olga (1966)", and "Relative Figures Appear".

"A Lamentation" discusses the poet’s complicated emotions of loss after her sister’s death. There is a tension in the poem between the
need to deny grief, and paradoxically, to express it. The traditional, liturgical language of the first two lines elevates the dead sister to a mythological status:

Grief, have I denied thee? 1
Grief, I have denied thee.

The speaker in the poem suggests that daily cares distract her from a grief that she should feel. In order to distinguish between Olga's elevated status as a figure who should be cherished, and the poet's own rather prosaic position as a woman caught up in mundane activities, the language becomes prosaic:

Always denial. Grief in the morning, washed away in coffee, crumbled to a dozen errands between busy fingers. 2

The speaker in the poem seems to be full of self-contempt: she cannot express the grand emotions demanded by her sister's death because of mundane intrusions. There is a suggestion that the poet has failed her sister by not responding fully to her death. The subject matter of the poem is not Olga's death, but the poet herself. Levertov seems to be commenting on a universal inability to allow a total submission to grief. There is a sense that the speaker has betrayed both her sister and herself by denying her anguish and sense of loss. Yet the grief still exists in an unreachable part of the poet's consciousness:

There are hidden corners of sky choked with the swept shreds, with pain and ashes. 3
This poem is not a lament for the death of her sister; rather, it is a lament for the speaker's inability to free herself from the mundane world and surrender completely to her anguish. Levertov suggests that her failure to achieve this surrender of self causes her more anguish than the loss of her sister. Olga has been elevated to an archetypal figure who inspires the liturgical chant of the first two lines; the speaker in the poem is unable to achieve the necessary depth of loss demanded by this mythic figure. In a sense, Olga is personalised by her mythic status; she does not appear in a personal manner. In contrast, the prosaic images Levertov uses to describe her own reaction effectively portray the speaker as very vulnerable and human. This process of mythologizing Olga is a pattern which recurs in all the poems concerning Levertov's sister.

"Olga Poems" comprises seven distinct parts which trace the development of Olga from the age of sixteen to her death. Levertov presents a complex portrayal of her relationship with her sister. As in "A Lamentation", the subject matter of the poem revolves around the speaker's reactions, rather than emphasizing a portrayal of Olga. The voice of the poet is always lyric in tone - shifting from admiration to empathy to grief. The poem conveys a sense of what it means to be a woman, both from Olga's terrible struggles and from Levertov's position as the younger sister attempting to come to terms with Olga's death.

The first stanza effectively emphasizes the tragic difference between Olga's sensuality at sixteen and the destruction of death:

Sixteen. Her breasts
round, round, and
dark-nippled -

who now these two months long
is bones and tatters of flesh in earth.
This is a traditional approach to death: a grief for a fertility which
is now devastated by death. At this point, the poem is a straightforward,
universal lament.

The second part, which portrays Olga's obsession with socialism,
demonstrates a radically different point of view. There is both pity
and implied criticism in this portrayal which ends with an ironic
affection for Olga's continued rage at social injustice:

You wanted

to shout the world to its senses,
did you? - to browbeat

the poor into joy's
socialist republic - ...

Black one, black one,
there was a white
candle in your heart.

The term "black one" implies that Olga was the "black sheep" of the
family. Levertov seems to be representing a conventional point of
view here: that of the conservative sister who has contempt for
the excesses of her fanatical older sister. Yet this criticism is
muted by the poet's recognition of Olga's innate compassion: "there
was a white/candle in your heart." This blend of criticism and
compassion characterizes the voice of the speaker throughout the poem.
The conflict between the sisters remains unresolved; the tension in
the poem is formed by Levertov's ambiguity towards Olga: her obvious
affection for Olga is always tempered by her judgmental position.
This psychological tension is evident in the lines which explain Olga's
anguish:

...What rage for order

disorder - her pilgrimage - so that for years at a time
she would hide among strangers, waiting to rearrange all mysteries in a new light.

These conflicting feelings, which are recurrent in the imagery of the poem, are objectified in the simile describing Olga on her hospital bed, "while pain and drugs quarreled like sisters in you."

This simile effectively underlies the inevitable conflict between the sisters, which persists until Olga's death, and assumes a macabre form: pain and drugs. Neither image is at all positive; pain and drugs both represent negative aspects of life which evoke fear and suffering. Obviously, Levertov's relationship with Olga was very complex and painful, and even death has not resolved their differences.

The poem then returns to the past, and reveals the intimate, complicated connection between the sisters. The final section entwines past and present to demonstrate the unchanging conflict in their relationship and also to evoke a terrible sense of loss. Olga's death has not really changed the conflict-ridden nature of their relationship. Even after Olga's death, Levertov remains fixed in her role of the critical younger sister, still caught in ambivalent feelings of fear and admiration for Olga. Despite Levertov's analytical portrayal of her sister, Olga ultimately remains a mystery: an almost mythological female figure who transcends the ordinary. This concept of Olga as mysterious and almost mystical is very clear in the last few lines of the poem:

I cross
so many brooks in the world, there is so much light
a dancing on so many stones, so many questions my eyes
smart to ask of your eyes, gold brown eyes,
the lashes short but the lids
arched as if carved out of olivewood, eyes with some vision
of festive goodness in back of their hard, or veiled, or shining, or
unknowable gaze...
There has been a subtle shift in Levertov's point of view in this poem. The critical, dispassionate portrait of her sister who tried to "browbeat" people, and who lived a lonely, tormented life is transformed at the end of the poem into a completely different image: Olga has been mythologized by Levertov and achieves an enshrined position as a mysterious female archetype who carries her "unknowable" visions with her. There is the suggestion that death has redeemed Olga; her previous failures and obsessions appear trivial in comparison to the status she has achieved through death. This is a form of hagiography which recurs in Levertov's familial poems. She tends to elevate her family members to a type of sainthood, which, in a sense, effectively disguises their real natures. In "Olga Poems", Levertov uses dramatic language to describe Olga; as a result, their relationship is elevated beyond sibling rivalry to an archetypal conflict between two women who approach life very differently. There is the implication that relationships do not ever change their basic format; at the end of the poem, Levertov remains the eternal younger sister, seeking guidance from Olga, despite their tempestuous relationship.

In "A Note to Olga (1966)", Olga becomes a symbol of freedom: a universal figure who protests social injustice. Levertov sees an unknown social protestor and uses her as an opportunity, once again, to mythologize Olga so that her sister represents an eternal cry against man's inhumanity:

- It seems
  you that is lifted
limp and ardent
off the dark snow
and shoved in, and driven away.
Levertov seems to be stating that death is not final: memory remains and imagination can restore the loved one to life in a transient way, which is both mysterious and mystical. The nature and intensity of her role as Olga’s sister suggests that Levertov assigns an almost transcendental significance to their relationship.

Olga is the central figure in “Relative Figures Appear”, a dream-like poem in which she and Levertov’s mother and father present themselves to the poet in various forms. Levertov’s conflict with Olga is clearly expressed. Olga is initially presented as a figure of intrusion who exists inside the poet’s world:

She, returned in the form of youth
black of hair and dress
curls deaf in a poem. 10

The ambivalence which Levertov feels toward Olga is evident in her fear that she is intruding into her world. This concept is clarified at the end of the poem in the fantasy that her sister Olga is reading through her poems. The fears turn out to be unfounded, and the poet’s initial resentment turns to love:

...I turn to assuage
a quick fear my black sister is prying
into my world, but the garnered poems, stirring letters, dreams
are undisturbed on the open desk.
She reads on and is dear to me. 11

This poem, with its dexterous juxtaposition of fantasy and reality, conveys the poet’s typical ambivalence towards her sister. The initially sinister quality of intrusion is dispelled at the end of the poem;
the predominant feeling is one of cherishing this connection, rather than fearing it. The intimacy of her relationship with Olga, which is so obvious in "Olga Poems", is also present in this poem. The complex relationship of two sisters is convincingly detailed and represents the traditional female approach to a sister figure, with its inherent rivalries and fears. The poet's fear of her sister entering her world is emphasized in this poem; Olga is portrayed as a destructive figure, with evil overtones, as suggested by the phrase, "my black sister."

There are four poems related to Levertov's son which demonstrate her consistent use of the traditional maternal voice. "The Son" is divided into two parts: i) "The Disclosure" and ii) "The Woodblock". Both parts are concerned with Levertov's ambivalent feelings about her son's journey to adulthood. In the first part her son is described in almost mythological terms reminiscent of an Indian legend:

He-who-came-forth was
it turned out
a man - 12

This language conveys the wonder and mystery of birth by linking it with ancient mythology. The double meaning of "it turned out a man" suggests that the child becomes a separate being, a sexual "other". Levertov is aware of her son's sexual being which exists independently of his relationship as son to his mother. His emerging sexuality is thus an issue which the poet, as mother, must confront.
There are images of sensuality in the second stanza, which reinforce the concept of the son as a man coming to terms with his own sexuality. In contrast to the first stanza, the language of the second stanza is prosaic. But there are phrases intermingled with the prosaic which suggest a type of transcendence:

Moves among us from room to room of our life in boots, in jeans, in a cloak of flame pulled out of his pocket along with old candy wrappers, where it had lain transferred from pants to pants folded small as a curl of dust, from the beginning - unfurled now.

The fine flame almost unseen in common light,

The deliberate juxtaposition of the mystical phrase "cloak of flame" with the mundane line "along with old candy wrappers" suggests the turmoil and transient nature of adolescence. "Cloak of flame" suggests the passionate mantle of adulthood with its own torments; "candy wrappers" reflect the security of childhood. The image of fire reinforces the concept of the son's emerging sexuality. The suggestion that her son's promise is "almost unseen in common light" reveals Levertov's conviction that his uniqueness, his "fine flame" of sensuality can only be perceived by her. This concept is traditionally female in its pride; it reflects a typical maternal point of view: that the child is totally revealed only to his mother.

"The Woodblock", the second part of this poem, is a common maternal lament: how quickly children leave behind childhood. The passage of time is measured by the contrast between the son's present activity, wood-carving, and his childhood occupation of poster
painting:

He cuts into a slab of wood, engrossed, violently precise. Thus, yesterday, the day before yesterday, engines of fantasy were evolved in poster paints. Tonight a face forms under the knife.

The rapid passage of the son’s evolution from a boy painting engines to a man engrossed in wood-carving is emphasized by the dramatic final line: "Tonight/a face forms under the knife." There is a telling note of maternal grieving for the quickness of the passing years in the phrase, "...yesterday, the day before yesterday."

The maternal voice cannot quite accept that it has been many years since the man was a young boy playing with poster paint. Therefore, all the years of her son’s development are compressed into the word "yesterday" with its implication of hardly any time passing between then and now. A mother’s mixed feelings of pride and apprehension are evident in the final stanza:

deep into the manhood his childhood
so swiftly led to, a small brook rock-leaping
into the rap’t, imperious, seagoing river.

There has been a subtle transformation in Levertov’s point of view in this poem: the maternal voice expressing pride in her son changes to a generalized female voice regarding a male. In other words, the mother becomes woman regarding man, and ceases, to a degree, from being mother regarding son. As a result of this shift in perspective, the personally known child loses his identity as "son" and becomes the male archetype. The mythic language effectively evokes this concept of
transformation in the poet's perception. The son is no longer familiar as a child relating to his mother; he becomes a separate being: a man involved with his own sexuality, and no longer bound by his childhood identity of "son". The changing language from prosaic to mythic clearly reflects this transformation of point of view. Levertov has lyrically explored this complex, evolutionary change in the relationship between herself and her son.

The poem, "A Son", which appears in Life In The Forest (1978), Levertov's latest collection, has similarities to "The Son". Fire imagery is again used to show both the son's awakening sensuality and his potential:

The son
took, from both monsters, feathers
of pure flame,
and from his mother, alchemical gold,
and from his father, the salt of earth:
a triple goodness.

As in the earlier poem, a traditional maternal pride in her child is expressed. Heredity and ancestral connections assume primary importance. To Levertov, the son has inherited "a triple goodness". The lyrical language serves to distance the son from his role as child; as in "The Son", the speaker transforms the son into a male archetype.

This is evident in the concluding stanzas:

...but from his self
uprose a new fountain,
of wisdom, of in-seeing, of winged justice
flying unswerving
into the heart.
He and compassion
were not master and servant,
servant and master,
but comrades in pilgrimage.

There is a hymn-like tonal quality to the last four lines which both
reflects the archetypal nature of the son, and suggests the
inevitability of his destiny. Since the archetypal nature of the son
is portrayed consistently throughout this poem, the earlier tension
of "The Son" is absent. In this poem, Levertov's point of view
does not change from mother regarding son to that of woman regarding
man. Throughout this poem, the speaker distances herself from her
son by elevating him to a mythic, archetypal status which effectively
dispers the personal nature of a mother-son relationship. The traditional
maternal voice is completely absent in this poem; the son is not
described in terms of his relationship to his mother, but as an
independent being who achieves the position of male archetype. The
liturgical rhythm and elevated language reinforce this detached —
point of view.

"He-Who-Came-Forth" is a tribute to the mystery and wonder of
childbirth. Levertov's awareness of her son as a separate being,
distanced from herself is emphasized by the concluding image,
"beautiful and strange as if I had given birth to a tree." 18

The son stands apart from his mother; he has become a man, no longer
bound by a mother-son relationship. The comparison of her son with
a tree underlines Levertov's distanced point of view; she is no longer
a mother regarding her son; she is a woman awed by the existence
There is a pervasive sense of ecstasy regarding the conception of
the child, which is expressed in terms of its essential mystery.
The mother is initially cast as naïve, and part of a process only
partially understood. The language is tentative and clearly
conveys the poet's sense of bewildered joy:

```
Somehow nineteen years ago
clumsily passionate
I drew into me the seed
of a man-
and bore it, cast it out-
man-seed that grew
and became a person.
```

As in the other two poems regarding her son, Levertov distances her
son from her by portraying him as a male archetype, and therefore,
separate from her. As an archetype, her son resembles a tree; both
are symbols of beauty and exist independently, an integral part
of the natural order.

"The Park" demonstrates a maternal joy in the innocence and
perception of childhood. The poet's rapture at the mystical beauty of
the park is ignored by adults. Levertov contrasts the beauty of the
setting with the apathy of the spectators:

```
Already a ghost of fire
glides on the lake. In a mist
the flames of its body
pass shuddering over the dark ripples.

But they turn their heads
away, the tall people,
they talk and delay.
```
The poet and her child are intimately jointed by their recognition of the natural mystery of the world. They both share a mystical vision born of innocence which is exclusively theirs:

Only the boy, my son, at last ready, comes and discovers joyfully...
and believes in all wonders to come in the park over-the-way, country of open secrets where the elm shelters the construction of gods and true magic exceeds all design.

Two themes are expressed here: the concept that only children can appreciate the wonder of the universe, and the idea that the poet must be receptive to the awe of the world in order to create. Thus, childhood innocence and creativity are a necessary connection for the poet. In this poem, Levertov defines her point of view as a poet; the poetic voice dominates the poem. There is no trace of a maternal voice. The poet and her son face a third reality beyond that of their relationship: the beauty of nature. In a sense, the son is seen as a part of the poet in that they both share a similar perspective. However, their intimacy does not go beyond their shared reaction to the world. The early tension of "The Son" with its shifting point of view, is noticeably absent in this poem.

"Illustrious Ancestors" illustrates Levertov's emphasis on familial connections and fits in topically with the later poems about her mother. This poem describes Levertov's unusual ancestors: the Russian Jews on her father's side and the Welsh mystics of her mother's
lineage. The poem proudly emphasizes the meditative nature of both ancestral connections:

The Rav
of Northern White Russia declined,
in his youth, to learn the
language of birds, because
the extraneous did not interest him, nevertheless
when he grew old it was found
he understood them anyway, having
listened well, and as it is said, 'prayed
with the bench and the floor.' He used
what was at hand - as did
Angel Jones of Hold, whose meditations
were sewn into coats and britches.

The rhythm is anecdotal, and the tone is so casual as to resemble that of a conversation. The images are deliberately homely,

"'prayed with the bench and the floor'" to describe the studious Rav,
and the description of the mystical tailor "those meditations were sewn into coats and britches." Levertov juxtaposes these homely images of humble industry with the mysticism which both ancestors practised. The imagery is feminine in its domesticity and provides a link with Levertov the female poet and her ancestors.

Having established herself as descended from unusual men of vision, the poet then reflects on her position in this lineage, and expresses her hope that she too can create something beyond the ordinary:

Well, I would like to make,
thinking some line still taut between me and them,
poems direct as what the birds said,
hard as a floor, sound as a bench,
mysterious as the silence when the tailor
would pause with his needle in the air.
This final part of the poem unites the homely images of the first part to express both Levertov's pride in her lineage and a desire to pay tribute to her ancestors by making poems that combine both the positive and negative aspects of mysticism.

In her collection of prose essays, The Poet In The World, Levertov comments on the motivation for "Illustrious Ancestors":

(This poem) carries the sense, shared by my late sister, I believe, of having a definite and peculiar destiny which seemed signalized by our having had among our ancestors two men who living at the same period (1700s, early 1800s) but in very different cultures, had preoccupations which gave them a basic kinship... a kinship that Olga and I felt must be recognized in heaven, or on earth would be somehow unified and redeemed in us. One of them was Schneour Zalman, the founder of Habad Hasidism; the other, Angel Jones of Mold, a Welsh tailor whose apprentices came to learn Biblical interpretations from him while cutting and stitching. The presence in the imagination of such figures and their relation to oneself is a kind of personal mythology, and can function as a source of confidence and as an inspiration for the artist...

Life In The Forest has several poems dealing with Levertov's role as a daughter. Two such poems are entitled "A Daughter (I)" and "A Daughter (II)". The first of these describes the poet's grief at her mother's approaching death. There is also an awareness of their role changes: the once comforting mother has become a helpless child, and the poet misses the strong, protective love that her mother is unable to give:

the daughter knows
another, hidden part of her longed - or longs - for her mother to be her mother again, consoling, judging, forgiving, whose arms were once

strong to hold her and rock her

... Now mother is child, helpless;
Levertov is describing a role change that is familiar to many women. When aging occurs, many daughters become mothers to their mothers. This is feminine in that sons cannot "father" their fathers. This poem can be seen as a universal lament for daughters who are forced to watch their mothers become child-like: "And the daughter feels, with horror, metamorphosed." 26

The poem ends with the daughter's need for escape from this metamorphosis to oblivion:

...She imagines entering a dark cathedral to pray, and blessedly falling asleep there, and not waking for a year, for seven years, for a century. 27

The church represents a womb-like female image of strength and security; this imagery reflects the daughter's longing to return to her mother as a mother figure. Unlike the speaker of her poems regarding sister and her son, Levertov does not mythologize her mother in this poem. As a result, the point of view of the speaker in this poem is not distanced; the daughter assumes an intimate, personal relationship with her dying mother. The woman is seen as the crux of the family unit, both as the daughter who grieves over her mother's helplessness, and as the dying mother whose approaching death leaves a terrible emptiness.

"A Daughter (II) describes the poet's return to Mexico for the final week of her mother's life. The daughter feels abandoned; her identity is closely bound to her mother. The thought of her mother's approaching death causes her to feel an overwhelming sense of aloneness:

"...She clings, drink in hand, to her isolation." 28
Levertov also describes the feeling that there should be a moment of total communion between herself and her mother, while at the same time acknowledging the impossibility of achieving this. The poet's universal aching for a final affirmation of love from her mother is clearly expressed at the end of the poem: "What she wants/she knows she can't have: one minute of communion, here in limbo." 29

The deliberately religious language of "communion" and "limbo" invests the poem with a spirituality which suggests the bond between the poet and her mother transcends the secular world. The daughter feels grief and confusion at the loss of this intimate connection; yet, at the same time, there is a suggestion in the language she uses that even death cannot sever the bonds of their relationship. The liturgical language of both poems underlies this conviction. Levertov never completely succumbs to despair; her sense of ancestral destiny, reflected in the other poems discussed, serves to bolster her, and enable her to transcend the grief and impotence she feels.

"Death In Mexico" uses the image of her mother's neglected garden to convey Levertov's sense of outrage at her mother's death. This metaphor thematically links death with disorder and viciousness:

a lusterless jungle green, presented—
even before her dying was over—
an obdurate, blind, all-seeing gaze:
...A gaze that admits no tenderness...
The garden becomes an image for all that is alien and ritualistic about her mother's death. Instead of Christian imagery, pagan imagery is used to describe Levertov's sense of loss and exclusion:

...Her death was not Mexico's business. The garden though was a hostage. Old gods took back their own.

There is an implication here that the poet's mother has returned through her death to her own ancestral home, just as the garden has been returned to its rightful "gods". The mythical return implies the importance for Levertov of ancestral destiny and her preoccupation with the demands and rewards of family descent.

"A Visit", which describes the poet's caring for her mother before her death, provides us with another glimpse of Levertov in the role of daughter. The first part is concerned with the intrusion of daily duties into the life of the imagination:

When there is work to be done
moonwaver; images
of sentiment and desire
ride away into the forest.

There may be resentment that Levertov's life as a poet, which is essentially concerned with the making of "moonwaving images", is interrupted by her mother's illness. This notion of the diminishing of poetic intensity because of mundane ch" is repeated in the second part:

When there is work to do
one laughs at oneself,
the intense life of the heart
stops talking.
This awareness of intrusion that the daughter feels is completely dispelled in the final stanza. The mother's sense of humour seems to rescue the daughter from the implied resentment of the earlier lines:

'The bandage is like a knight's armour', she says. 'What dragons are to be vanquished?'

The mother's blend of humour and imagination evokes both admiration and pity. This poem contrasts with the "Daughter" poems in which the mother is depicted as child-like and helpless. The heroic aspect of her character is evident in the last stanza. We have an image of a resilient woman who confronts death with laughter. The strong maternal figure eventually wins over her daughter who initially resented the demands made upon her. The mother's humour and courage justify the obvious love which she receives from her daughter. The reader is also drawn into admiration for the poet's mother. In this poem, the mother is eternally strong, even while dying. This, of course, represents a female approach to the maternal figure as life-affirming and nurturing.

"A Soul-Cake" continues this theme of the maternal figure as powerful and affirmative. It is both a tribute to the poet's mother and a lament for her death. Levertov obviously empathizes with her mother's struggles and relates them to her own situation as a mother. Thus, another aspect of their bond is revealed: they both had children to nurture. Levertov compares her sensation of grief at her mother's death to an experience she had while visiting her son at camp:
My throat clenches when I weep and
can't make tears,
the way my feet clenched when I ran
unsuspecting into icy ocean
for 'General Swim', visiting Nik at summer camp.

These lines demonstrate how mother and daughter are linked by a
common maternity. But their connection is deeper than this shared
fatt of motherhood. Levertov displays an intimate, personal perception
of her mother's nature. A deep empathy is revealed in the poet's
insight into her mother's loneliness:

To strangers your unremitting
struggle to learn, appears
a triumph - to me, poignant. I know
how baffled you felt.
I know only I
knew how lonely you were.

The lines which state that only the daughter knew of her mother's
loneliness effectively exclude the rest of the world and draw mother
and daughter into a powerful and isolating intimacy. This is a
particularly female orientation: that only a daughter would really
know her mother's nature. This concept of exclusion also occurs
in two of Levertov's poems about her son in which the mother claims
exclusive awareness of her son's potential.

The poem ends on a plaintive, helpless note which suggests that
even after her death, the mother represents an almost omniscient
figure who can answer a question which is essentially unanswerable:

There's too much grief. Mother,
what shall I do with it?
Salt grinding and grinding from the magic box.
These lines suggest a return on the part of the daughter to a childhood state, and provide an effective means of conveying the futility of the poet's grief. The daughter is driven by her grief to yearn for the security of childhood when her mother provided all the answers. This technique renders the daughter's loss even more pathetic and effectively conveys the depth of her anguish over her mother's death.

The fact that the daughter still turns to the mother for guidance in the midst of her grief emphasizes the strength of their relationship which transcends the physical fact of death. Even after her mother's death, Levertov remains the eternally dependent daughter-figure, asking for maternal direction. It is a psychological truism that the mother-daughter relationship never completely evolves from the dependency learned in childhood.

As this examination of the familial voice demonstrates, Levertov's presuppositions are all traditionally female. The importance of the family and ancestral connections is emphasized. The maternal figure is portrayed as powerful and nurturing, even when death approaches. Levertov also emphasizes the strong ties between mother and daughter, which transcend the secular world. The wonder of childbirth is celebrated, which illustrates a typical female point of view. It is obvious in these poems that the writer is celebrating and discovering her technique from the point of view of a woman's experience.

This is not to suggest that the voice is uniform in these poems. The voice changes radically in the poems, and is determined by subject matter. The point of view in the sister poems is complex and reflects the fear and rivalry inherent in her relationship with her sister, Olga. There is a psychological tension in these poems which revolves around
the tempestuous nature of their relationship. After Olga's death, she becomes a symbol of female suffering. In this way, Levertov universalizes her relationship with her sister.

The point of view in these poems reflects the ambivalence of Levertov's feelings toward Olga.

In the poems about her son, Levertov's point of view becomes distanced from a typical mother-son relationship. She uses mythological language to describe her son which results in the son losing his identity as "son" and becoming a male archetype. Therefore, the traditional mother-son relationship is dispelled, and the poet relinquishes her identity as his mother. Instead, she becomes woman regarding man, rather than mother regarding her son. Thus, both mother and son become universal symbols of a male-female relationship, with the female traditionally assuming sensations of awe at the male's sexuality.

Levertov does not mythologize her mother, or create an archetype to portray her. The mother emerges clearly as an individual in the daughter poems. There is an obvious lack of the mythological language and lyric style which characterize the other poems of the familial voice. Levertov's occasional use of the third person in these poems probably indicates an attempt to universalize their relationship. These poems, however, are so strongly personal, and obviously based on direct experience, that this technique doesn't really work. The portrayal of the poet's mother is so vivid and individual that it is almost impossible for these poems to be translated into universal application.
From these poems of the familial voice we can conclude that Levertov is a poet who writes directly out of her personal, female experience. The shifting point of view in these poems reflects her emphasis on family relationships as an important part of her experience, and therefore, an appropriate subject matter for her poetry.
References


21 Ibid., p. 70.


23 Ibid., p. 87.


26 Ibid., p. 27.

27 Ibid., p. 28.


29 Ibid., p. 31.


31 Ibid., p. 33.


33 Ibid., p. 38.

34 Ibid., p. 38.


36 Ibid., p. 41.

37 Ibid., p. 42.
CHAPTER THREE - THE SENSUAL VOICE
Levertov's use of the sensual voice is similar in intensity to her use of the familial voice. The poems which deal with her love for her husband and a lover demonstrate a lyric passion which rarely falters. It seems probable that the persona Levertov adopts in these personal poems is that of a woman who rejoices in her sexual role as a woman and idealizes this role. The poems which I will discuss in this chapter are thematically very similar: they all reveal Levertov's conviction that a woman's role as wife or mistress is central to her identity. Unlike feminist poets who deplore traditional female submission to the male, Levertov delights in this aspect of the female experience. Many of the poems are intensely celebratory; others describe the pain of separation in a manner which suggests that even though grief may result from a male-female relationship, there is always a compensating ecstasy.

The poems are arranged into three main groups: marriage poems, post-marriage poems, and affair and post-affair poems. In each category I will discuss the tension between the two points of view suggested by the mythical and the personal poems. The mythical poems are those about the physical aspects of love, and tend, in their universality to destroy the point of view of the poet. In contrast, the personal poems demonstrate a clearly recognizable point of view.
Levertov's traditionally romantic approach is evident in one of the poems in her first volume, *The Double Image* (1946). "Dover Beach" can be considered as the prototype of this type of poem. Levertov, however, adds a metaphysical dimension to Arnold's theme, as she suggests that love is more than mere refuge from pain.

"The Conquerors" portrays love as the only constant solace in a world full of fear and pain and an absolute value which is isolated from the pettiness of the world and untainted by human ambition. Love is described in mystical language which evokes a sensation of mysterious grandeur:

Love lies bleeding
alone, alone
lost beyond the air
whose palaces are sombre, far from sun,
far from the bitter brilliance of the sun;
or deep below the earth, as sunken streams
shed ever-darkening wine
in throbbing veins of stone,...

In this first part, love is both elevated and hidden from the secular world: it remains inviolate, untouched by human contact. In the last part of the poem, tormented conquerors are unable to attain love: for them of all men it remains elusive. Levertov suggests that you cannot have both love and the world; the conquerors must choose. The choice, however, is always possible, even for conquerors, so that the cure for their despair lies within reach. This promise of potential comfort is evident in the last few lines of the poem:

: the invaders lie awake
tormented by the treason in their hearts;
but love alone and deaf to their despair
lies like a rock,
an island in the sorrow of the air.
There is the suggestion that love cannot be sullied by the evil aspects of human nature. Initially love is personified, which assigns love a place of supreme importance in the human condition. But, in the final stanza, Levertov uses a simile that dehumanizes love and makes it greater than man: a rock which is eternal and enduring. The technique of shifting from a personification of love to a de-humanization of it imbues love with both vulnerability and timeless endurance. This early poem, which elevates love to a quasi-mystical possibility, is indicative of Levertov's subsequent treatment of the issue of sensual love. This poem belongs in the mythical category of these poems, with its impersonal, universal theme. As a result of this impersonality, the poet's point of view disappears. The emphasis on the universal destroys the poet's individuality, and, in the process, her point of view.

In "Love Poem", published in Here And Now (1957), Levertov discusses the power of sexual love to destroy barriers between two people. The first part of the poem deals with the pain and uncertainty that the poet feels; her awareness of the distance between her and her lover is poignantly described:

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Maybe I'm a 'sick part of a sick thing'
maybe something has caught up with me
certainly there is a mist between us.
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The use of the term "mist" to describe the distance between the
two lovers clearly conveys a sense of blindness and disorientation.
The last part of the poem describes the reconciliation of the two
lovers: the sense of isolation is dispelled by sexual contact:

but your hands
are two animals that push the
the mist aside and touch me.

There is a deliberate connection between sexuality and the natural
world. Isolation and despair are described as a "mist";
reconciliation with her lover is described in terms of animal life:
her lover's hands become "two animals". Thus, Levertov suggests that
sexual love in its negative and positive aspects is a basic instinct
comparable to the natural world of weather and animals. There is no
questioning of the male-female relationship, but an instinctive acceptance
of this bond which is as universal and unchanging as the laws of weather
and nature. This poem, like the previous one, belongs to the mythical
category of Levertov's poems, as it celebrates the physical aspects
of love in a universal, impersonal manner.

In "The Necessity", which is part of the marriage poems, Levertov
explores the various aspects of sensual love. Again, love is reflected
in the natural world of flowers and rocks. What is mere variety in
nature becomes paradox in love. Love is the focus and embodiment of
all nature. The images here concentrate all this natural variety:

from love one takes
petal to rock and blessed
away towards
descend, ...
The words "petal" and "rock" evoke the fragility and stability of love. The second stanza celebrates the joy of intellectual confidence, and describes the poet's distance and perspective on the experience she senses within:

one took thought
for frail tint and spectral
glisten, trusted
from way back that stillness.

The ecstasy of unwavering passion is described in the next stanza in terms of fiery gold:

one knew
that heart of fire, rose
at the core of gold glow,
could go down undiminished.

This stanza describes another dimension of the paradox of female sexuality: in surrender, in decline, the woman emerges triumphant, she blazes. In the last two stanzas Levertov explains the need to risk establishing a love relationship:

each part
of speech a spark
awaiting redemption, each
a virtue, a power

in abeyance unless we
give it care
our need designs in us. Then
all we have led away returns to us.
The second last stanza again uses fire imagery to suggest that sexuality transforms speech into the fire of love. Without passion, the “spark” would remain untouched; sensual love has the power of “redemption” to transform language. The last stanza asserts that passion must be nurtured to stay alive, and then the sacrifice demanded is worthwhile. This is clearly a woman’s perspective: that the demands of sensuality are redeemed by the ecstasy of physical and intellectual communion. Levertov’s metaphors are rooted in the natural elements of flowers, rocks, and fire. This establishes love as natural, but it further suggests love is the whole of nature in microcosm, its purpose and fulfillment. The fiery consummation of sex is therefore, in a sense, apocalyptic. And what it reveals is the meaning of human life, which is also the meaning of the universe. This poem is remarkable for its condensed, breathless language and lyric intensity. These two qualities reinforce the urgency of the poem’s theme; the reader is drawn into immediate agreement with the speaker’s point of view. This poem belongs in the personal category, as opposed to the mythical category, as we are able to identify the speaker’s identity and her point of view. The point of view is one of conviction of the necessity to take risks to establish a love relationship and demonstrates an adventurous attitude. At the crux of the speaker’s attitude is the belief that love is an integral part of the human experience. The voice is personal, and therefore distinct from the experience she is writing about.

“The Ache of Marriage”, which is a part of the marriage poems, describes the intimacy of marriage by using a Biblical motif: the concept of the ark to describe the ancient need for men and women to mate. The paradoxical nature of marriage, with its isolation and intimacy is initially described in sexual terms:
The ache of marriage
thigh and tongue, beloved
are heavy with it,
it throbs in the teeth

The inevitable solitude of human beings, despite their closeness, is
described in the next stanza:

We look for communion
and are turned away, beloved, each and each.

This is a universal lament: that each human being is ultimately
trapped within himself; it is impossible to achieve a total intimacy
with another person. Levertov suggests in the last two lines that
this isolation is an inevitable part of the human condition. The
image of the ark is employed to convey the sense of an eternal and
doomed search for total intimacy that has existed for centuries:

two by two in the ark of
the ache of it.

Yet the ark has positive connotations as it implies the existence and
survival of lovers since primeval times. Even the ache presupposes a
survival which is shared, and an alternative to drowning, and therefore
implies a continuity and security. There is a strong sense of despair
in this poem: a fatalistic attitude towards ever achieving total
communion. The need for a complete unity with her husband can be
constructed as a particularly female concern. It is a truism that women tend to emphasize sensual love, and elevate it to a position of primary importance in their lives. This poem is within the personal category of poems, as it indicates a clear point of view. The voice in the poem is putting forth an identifiable argument: that human beings are condemned to solitude. This poem contrasts with the earlier poems which indicate a mystical, universal outlook.

"Eros at Temple Stream", which belongs with the marriage poems, describes the speaker of the poem and her lover bathing at a stream. The poem is infused with a simple sensuality which is evident in the second stanza:

slowly
smoothing in long sliding strokes
our soapy hands along each other's slippery cool bodies.

The poem ends on a climax of fiery sensuality. The last two stanzas produce a powerful image of an all-encompassing passion which causes the two lovers to burst into flame:

our hands were
flames
stealing upon quickened flesh until
no part of us but was sleek and
on fire.
The speaker in this poem obviously perceives sexual love as a powerful force with the ability to transform the human self into a fiery element. The self in the poem undergoes a metamorphosis from a slippery, cool state to an enflamed condition. The voice of the speaker reverberates with passion and emphasizes the conviction that sexual love has the power to totally consume human beings—to alter them radically. This poem, with its impersonal treatment of the universal quality of sensual love, belongs to the mythical category of Levertov's poetry. The individuality of the speaker is lost in the universality of the poem, and, as a result, her point of view is absent.

In "Our Bodies", another marriage poem, the speaker assigns a role of primary importance to the human body. The self perceives the body as vastly superior to the mind. This perception, is, of course, a glorification of the sensual element of man as opposed to his intellectual aspect. Levertov compares bodies to stars, much superior to the plump of my belly; the hollow of your groin, as a constellation,

how it leans from earth to dawn in a gesture of play and

wise compassion—nothing like this comes to pass in eyes or wistful mouths.
Thus, the sensual nature of man is elevated to a point where it possesses its own wisdom and compassion. At the end of the poem Levertov connects sensuality with the natural world, and suggests that both represent a purity and sense of security:

Your long back
the sand colour and
how the bones show, say
what sky after sunset
almost white
over a deep woods to which

rooks are homing, says.

The parallel statement here suggests that the man's body occupies a superior position in the universe: it is similar to the sky at sunset. The male body is mythologized in this last stanza; it becomes the sky, and therefore loses its personal identity. This technique serves to distance the speaker from her lover; he has become a symbol of sensuality, and therefore loses his individual qualities. A similar transformation occurs to the speaker in the poem: she ceases to be a woman regarding her particular, personal lover, and becomes a woman regarding man, awed by his powers of sensuality. This poem, which is a celebration of the physical, belongs to the mythical category of Levertov's poems. The universal aspect of the poem obliterates any sense of a personal, individual voice, and therefore, point of view also disappears. The poet does not offer an individual argument; she simply states a universal truism, and it is impossible to discover a particular point of view herein.
"The Wife", which also belongs with the marriage poems, differs radically from "Eros at Temple Stream" as it emphasizes the intellectual aspects of the lover. The poem focusses on the mental intimacy of husband and wife. The speaker in the poem celebrates her joy in her husband's mental prowess. Once again, the male is compared to the natural world, but it is his mind that receives praise, not his body. The ecstasy of this intellectual type of communion is described:

...certainly when I catch your mind in the act of plucking truth from the dark surrounding nowhere.
as a swallow skims a gnat from the deep sky.
I don't stop to ask myself
Do I love him? but
laugh for joy.

This is an intensely celebratory poem which again mythologizes the husband; his mind becomes a swallow. This demonstrates Levertov's perception that human love is intimately connected with the natural world: an integral part of the universe. Unlike "Our Bodies", which is a mythical poem, "The Wife" is an intensely personal poem. The point of view is one of praise for, and delight in her husband's mental prowess. In this poem, the reader does not receive a universal statement, but rather, a personal, particular account of how mental acuity in her husband sustains the poet's love for him.
In "The Poem Unwritten", another marriage poem, Levertov uses religious language to describe a sexual relationship. Words like "rite", "worship" and "prayer" are used to describe the sensual act. The speaker perceives the man's body as a poem:

For weeks the poem of your body,
of my hands upon your body
stroking, sweeping, in the rite of
worship, going
their way of wonder down
from neck-pulse to breast-hair to level
belly to cock-
for weeks that poem, that prayer
unwritten.

There is a suggestion that in order to properly celebrate her love, and to reify it, the speaker must write a poem about it. If not, the beauty of the act will remain obscured by time:

The poem unwritten, the act
left in the mind, undone. The years
a forest of giant stones, of fossil stumps, blocking the altar.

There is a repetition of the liturgical language of the first stanza: an "altar" is used to describe the sensual act. The speaker of the poem seems to be making two statements concerning her love relationship. First, it is something to approach reverently: her lover becomes part of this act of worship, and the act of love is like a sacrament. Together they are affirming life, their humanity, and the universe. Prayer is a symbol which is open to real theological dimensions. Second, the speaker suggests that unless the act of love is translated into a poem, it will remain hidden and nullified by the passing years.
There is thus an indication that the sensual relationship must be transformed creatively to retain its significance. This suggests that the speaker in the poem assigns a primary emphasis to the sensual relationship; it is an exalted state which demands immortality through the making of a poem. This poem indicates a personal outlook, in contrast to the mythical poems discussed. In this poem, the point of view is clear: the speaker celebrates both the sensual act and the creative act, and makes them inter-dependent.

"Bedtime", another marriage poem, celebrates the unity of the speaker and her husband. To convey this intense intimacy, Levertov uses a nature metaphor:

\[
\text{We are a meadow where the bees hum,} \\
\text{mind and body are almost one.}
\]

The lovers are transformed by their communion into a part of the natural world. The speaker seems to be suggesting that their intimacy is so strong that their human identity is dissolved and they enter into an inanimate state. The concluding images of this poem reinforce this concept of loss of human identity:

\[
\text{we drowse as horses drowse afield,} \\
\text{in accord; though the fall cold} \\
\text{surrounds our warm bed, and though} \\
\text{by day we are singular and often lonely.}
\]
The speaker is obviously aware of a recurrent feeling of solitude which makes her sensation of unity with her lover even more precious. Their communion results in a return to a simpler form, that of horses drowsing. Thus, the complexity of being human is dissolved, and the two lovers are transformed into a purer state. This poem belongs in the mythical category of Levertov's poems. Along with the dissolution of human complexity, there also occurs a loss of point of view, as the speaker does not articulate an individual argument; she simply states a universal truism about the joys of physical communion.

"Hymn to Eros", another marriage poem, is a lyric poem in which the speaker yearns for a complete surrender to sensuality. The poet wishes to be free to celebrate the act of love, to achieve a total sexuality. The poet is wearing a mask composed of a highly artificial pagan language. There is thus a tension between the impersonality of the mode and the tactile intimacy of the imagery. As a result, point of view tends to disappear in this highly mythologized structure. The rhythm of the poem resembles a liturgical chant; the language is elevated:

O Eros, silently smiling one, hear me.
Let the shadows of thy wings brush me.
Let thy presence enfold me, as if darkness were swaddled.

Again, the speaker suggests that the lovers will be transformed by
love into a fiery state:

Close my beloved with me
in the smoke ring of thy power
that we may be, each to the other,
figures of flame,
figures of smoke,
figures of flesh
newly seen in the dusk.

The speaker indicates her conviction in this final stanza that love has the ability to re-create: the two lovers will be “newly seen in the dusk”. Thus, a metamorphosis occurs due to the power of sensual love. This poem reinforces the poet’s conviction that sensual love has the power to transform individuals, to re-create them in another form. As mentioned earlier, there is no apparent point of view in this poem; it falls into the mythical category of Levertov’s poems, with its mythological format and universal theme. It is impossible to discover an individual, personal voice or point of view in this poem.

“What She Could Not Tell Him”, another marriage poem, describes the speaker’s yearning for total intimacy and knowledge of her lover. There is a desperate tone to the speaker’s voice as she expresses this desire:

I wanted
to know all the bones of your spine, all
the pores of your skin,
tendrils of body hair.
The poem progresses from this desire for intimacy to a need to leave
an eternal mark on her lover. There is a possessiveness suggested in
these lines: a need to completely own her lover:

To let
all of my skin, my hands,
ankles, shoulders, breasts,
even my shadow
be forever imprinted
with whatever of you
is forever unknown to me. 24
To cradle your sleep.

The last line has a maternal implication; the lover's status is changed
to that of a small boy, and the role of the speaker becomes a mother
figure. Thus, the self in the poem combines a sensual and maternal
persona which demonstrates a new aspect to Levertov's sensual voice.
In previous poems, the lover has been mythologized, and the act of love
described in a liturgical manner. In this poem, the lover assumes a
child-like role as someone who needs protection and nurturing. Levertov
is exploring the multi-faceted voices of sexual love and is demonstrating
a psychological truism: women express sensual love in a variety of
ways, with the maternal urge always an integral part of this experience.
This poem belongs to the personal category of Levertov's sensual poems; the
point of view is distinctive and clearly identifiable. The speaker wishes
to possess her lover completely, in both a sexual and maternal way.
There is an individual argument put forth that the reader can either
agree with, or disagree with.
"Divorcing", which is a post-marriage poem, describes the fear and pain associated with the breakdown of the marital relationship. The ambivalent nature of marriage with its paradoxical mixture of suffocating entrapment and joyful intimacy is brilliantly evoked:

One garland
of flowers, leaves, thorns
was twined round our two necks.
Drawn tight, it could choke us,
yet we loved its scratchy grace,
our fragrant yoke.

As in "Bedtime", the two people here have become animals; the power of their intimacy has transformed them, in a negative way, into two animals yoked together. Their overwhelming intimacy becomes even more explicit in the second stanza:

We were Siamese twins.
Our blood’s not sure
if it can circulate,
now we are cut apart.
Something in each of us is waiting
to see if we can survive,
severed.

Unlike the previous poems, which suggest an exalted, glorified approach to a sensual relationship, this poem is infused with disillusionment. The imagery is vividly anguishd. Marriage is described in terms of a suffocating yoke which aptly evokes hardship and tedium. The harshness of these images reflects the agony of the speaker; she is obviously trying to come to terms with the loss of her husband, and the mutual dependence fostered by their relationship. The poem ends on an uncertain note which reflects the apprehension of the speaker’s voice. The lyric voice of the previous poems which eulogizes the sensual act and mythologizes
the lover, is noticeably absent in this poem. By using explicit images, the speaker clearly conveys the suffering caused by her marital breakdown. This poem fits into the personal category of the poems about the sensual voice. The point of view, which is individual and personal, suggests the argument that marriage consists of a debilitating intimacy which makes separation tremendously painful. This is a unique point of view which corresponds with the individual voice in the poem, and makes no attempt to be universally applicable.

"Silk", which belongs to the affair poems, is one of a series of poems written about a love affair the poet had after her divorce. The first part of the poem traces the speaker's dependence on her lover. His letter, which is next to her bed, has the power to soothe her when she wakes during the night:

What I know of him is a flow unbroken from word to touch, from body to thought’s dance or stillness. Therefore into my palm off the paper rises what soothes me, indivisible; I can return into the sea of sleep. 27

The second part of the poem parallels the first: her lover's voice on the telephone enfolds her with a warmth which dispels the cold distances between them, just as his letter enables her to sleep peacefully. The speaker imagines that she can wrap herself inside her lover's
voice:

Today the telephone
brought me his voice itself:
the silk of it
is darker than I remembered,
and warmer.
I took the folds of it up
to wrap myself in,
to keep off the cold of
all the snowfields between us.

In this stanza, the lover is once again idolized. The poet's point of view suggests that her lover possesses a unique power to defeat natural laws of distance and weather to bring her solace. Due to the strength of her love, the speaker attributes super-human qualities to her lover. The poem suggests the speaker's conviction that her lover is not an ordinary human being bound by physical laws; she presents him as an idealized version of a lover with god-like powers. This poem belongs in the personal category of the sensual poems. There is an individual, readily identifiable point of view which asserts that the lover is a super-human being. The speaker also reveals her own tendency to worship her lover. In contrast to the mythical poems which do not present a point of view, there is evidence in this poem of a strong point of view.

"Epilogue", a post-affair poem, is a short, rather cynical poem expressing the speaker's disillusionment at the end of her love affair. The poet contrasts her past illusions concerning her lover with the present
I thought I had found a swan
but it was a migrating snow-goose.

I thought I was linked invisibly to another's life
but I found myself more alone with him than without him.

I thought I had found a fire
but it was the play of light on bright stones.

I thought I was wounded to the core
but I was only bruised.

This poem is radically different from the majority of the poems discussed in which the lover is mythologized or idealized. The point of view in this poem is one of wry cynicism: the speaker seems to be mocking her past dreams. She recognizes the role of imagination in love affairs and views it as simply illusory. This is a new voice: realistic, gently mocking. The speaker is not enmeshed passionately in the sensual voice, as in most of the other poems discussed; in this poem, the voice is distanced, dispassionate. The point of view has altered from an immediate glorification to a distanced denigration of the sensual act.

This poem belongs to the personal category of the poems of the sensual voice. There is a readily identifiable point of view, and a distinct voice of mocking disillusionment. Levertov puts forth the argument that imagination comprises a major part of the sensual experience, and deludes the lover into exaggerating her emotions.

There is a definite tension in the poems of the sensual voice between the mythical poems which do not have a recognizable point of view and the personal poems which have a readily identifiable point of view. This tension acts as a focal point for Levertov's real voice.
which appears to be flexible. The existence of these polarities of voice indicates a radical shift in her point of view from personal non-existence in the mythical poems to a strong, assertive, personal presence in the personal poems.

The majority of the poems of the sensual voice are hymns of celebration which glorify the sensual act. In many cases, the speaker mythologizes or idealizes her lover, just as she mythologizes her sister and transforms her son into an archetype. This mythologizing pattern in the poems of the sensual voice serves to distance the speaker from her husband or lover. The reader does not form an image of the husband or lover as personal individuals; they both seem to embody universal, eternal traits of the male lover. This technique also serves to universalize these poems; readers are able to make a "leap" of identification with the speaker. Thus, in these poems, the speaker becomes "everywoman"; she loses her identity as an individual and becomes a symbol representing the joys and sorrows of all women involved in a love relationship.

In these poems, the point of view is that of the traditional female. The male is often seen as a figure of worship, transformed into a sexual mythology. The sensual act is described in elevated terms which suggest that it is not only an integral part of human experience, but also an act which has the power to transcend the pettiness of the secular world to achieve almost a mystical state. In most of these poems, the male is perceived as a superior being; the speaker regards him with awe. Generally, the voice of the speaker is submissive; she rejoices in the power of the male who possesses the ability to transform both
of them into a purer form, to become part of the natural world.

The attribution of transformative powers to sensual love is a distinctly female tendency. It is a truism that women tend to assign love a primary place in human experience; women tend to attribute more importance to love than men do. In these poems, Levertov follows this tradition by attributing a transcendental quality to sensual love and elevating the sexual act to a rite of worship.
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13. Ibid., p. 55.


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CHAPTER FOUR - THE CREATIVE PROCESS
Levertov's poems dealing with the creative process display a similar intensity to the poems of the familial and sensual voice. There is also a similar use of elevated language and lyric voice. These poems are almost entirely dominated by the persona and viewpoint of the poet. The reason for this personal dominance is the nature of Levertov's subject matter; writing about writing is didactic, and self-regarding.

Often the creative process is described in terms of a sensual relationship in which the speaker adopts a passive, traditionally female role. In these poems there is a suggestion that the artist is not in control of the creative process; rather than initiating the process, the artist is a passive participant who submits to external forces. These poems which assert that the poet is passive correspond to the voice subsumed in myth. There are also poems in which the poet plays an active role, and the viewpoint is dominant. The final category of the poems of the creative process refers to poems which demonstrate a transformation from active to passive, or personal to mythic. These poems will be discussed in three categories: first, poems with an active metaphor; second, poems with a passive metaphor; and, finally, poems which demonstrate a dramatic enactment of transformation from the active to the passive metaphor.

An examination of these poems reveals Levertov's versatile use of the passive and active metaphors, and a combination of the passive and active attitudes.
"The Room" is one of the active poems. Levertov concentrates on the danger of solipsism for the artist: that is, that the existence of the self may distort the picture of the external world. Here Levertov is fully aware that point of view is the subject of the poem; she is concerned about point of view dominating. There is the suggestion that point of view is the essence of poetry, but it must correspond sympathetically to the poems. Levertov uses the image of mirrors to convey the idea that the entire world can simply be seen as self-referential:

With a mirror
I could see the sky.

With two mirrors or three
justly placed, I could see
the sun bowing to the evening chimneys.

The poet demonstrates her awareness of this danger of perceiving the world as a reflection of self:

I understand perfectly
that I could encounter my own eyes
too often - I take account
of the danger -

The concluding lines suggest Levertov's awareness of the necessity to balance her personal point of view with external reality:

I don't want to escape, only to see
the enactment of rites.
In this poem, the speaker assumes a dominant role; the poem is active and personal.

"Art", which belongs to the active poems, is a long, didactic poem in which the speaker assumes an assertive voice as she urges artists to create strong, enduring works of art. The poet describes the discipline and labour inherent in superior acts of creativity:

The best work is made from hard, strong materials, obstinately precise - the line of the poem, onyx, steel.

It's not a question of false constraints - but to move well and get somewhere wear shoes that fit.

To hell with easy rhythms - sloppy mules that anyone can kick off or step into.

The passive, yielding point of view is noticeably absent in this poem. The artist is portrayed as a dominant figure who is in control of the creative process. Poetry is portrayed as enduring and timeless; the poet is described as a figure who has the ability to craft eternal art out of the crude mass of common experience:

The gods die every day but sovereign poems go on breathing in a counter-rhythm that mocks the frenzy of weapons, their impudent power.

Incise, invent, file to poignance; make your elusive dream seal itself in the resistant mass of crude substance.
This is an active poem in that the speaker attributes qualities of control and dominance to the artist.

"A Cloak", which is also an active poem, is concerned with the dilemma of the poet who is identified with the persona in her poems, and eventually becomes this persona. The mask that is made is an expression of point of view. In this sense, the poem resembles "The Room" with its emphasis on the poet's perception. The poem begins with a description of Levertov's poetry, which tends towards the personal and confessional:

And I walked naked
from the beginning
breathing in
my life,
breathing out
poems,

arrogant in innocence. 6

The rest of the poem describes the gradual entrapment of the poet's personality in the persona created by her poetry:

But of the song-clouds my breath made
in cold air
a cloak has grown,
white and,
where here a word
there another
froze, glittering,
stone-heavy.

A mask I had not meant
to wear, as if of frost,
covers my face.

Eyes looking out,
a longing silent at song's core.
This poem is primarily concerned with the assumption of masks, and expresses by the use of active metaphors, a personal, limited point of view.

"The Well", which belongs to the passive poems, incorporates the theme of the poet as a passive figure in the creative process. In this poem, the speaker perceives the Muse as a guiding mentor; the poet herself stands passively on a bridge observing the Muse:

The Muse
  in her dark habit
trim-waisted
  wades into deep water.

The spring where she
  will fill her pitcher to the brim
wells out
  below the lake's surface, among
papyrus, where a stream
  enters the lake and is crossed
by the bridge on which I stand.

The description of the Muse, which begins traditionally as a bringer of water, changes radically in the third stanza to that of a specific person, Annie Sullivan, Helen Keller's teacher:

She stoops
  to gently dip and deep enough.
Her face resembles
  the face of the young actress who played
Miss Annie Sullivan, she who
  spelled the word 'water' into the palm
of Helen Keller, opening
  the doors of the world.
The poem ends with the speaker in the role of recipient from the Muse. The speaker has become Helen Keller, deaf, dumb, and blind, receiving the gift of speech from the Muse:

so that my heart leaps
    in wonder.
    Cold, fresh, deep, I feel the word 'water'
    spelled in my left palm.

This portrayal of the artist as a person stripped of her senses reinforces the concept of the artist's passivity. Until the Muse spells the word water in the artist's hand, the artist cannot see, hear, or speak. There is the suggestion here that the speaker gropes blindly in the world until the Muse restores her senses. The speaker is thus portrayed as helpless until the Muse interacts with her; she is dependent on this process to transform her from a state of sensory deprivation.

"A Walk Through the Notebooks" again casts the artist in a passive role as she observes her poetry take on a life of its own. The speaker acts as observer; her poetry functions independently of her:

let Sluggard Acre send up
sunflowers among its weeds,
ten foot high — let its thistles
display their Scottish magnificence,
mauve tam-o'-shanters and barbed plaid — ...
The speaker suggests that her poetry becomes animated, a source of its own energy, independent of her:

yes, set fire to frost-bitten crops,  
drag out forgotten fruit  
to dance the flame-tango,  
the smoke-gavotte,  
to live after all - ...

The last stanza indicates that the natural world is superior to human efforts, and thus plays a primary role in the creative process:

let the note elephant, become a song  
the white beast wiser than man  
raise a dust in the north woods,  
loping on corduroy roads to the arena.

There are two themes in this poem which suggest the passivity of the artist: first, the implication that the poetry has an independent life of its own, and second, the suggestion that the natural world, in its spontaneity, far surpasses any human efforts at creativity. Again, the role of the artist is seen as passive and secondary to the laws of the natural world. This poem follows the pattern of the passive poems of assigning the artist an inactive role in the creative process.

"Wings of a God", another passive poem, is obviously in debt to, and alludes to, Yeats's famous poem, "Leda and the Swan". Levertov
uses the implied metaphor of angels to describe the inspiration inherent in the creative process. The first stanza resembles the rhythm of a liturgical chant to convey the mystical quality of inspiration:

The beating of the wings.
Unheard.
The beat rising from dust
of gray streets
as now off pale fields.

Initially in this poem, the imagery eclipses point of view, and then point of view reasserts itself. Again, the artist is portrayed as a passive recipient of this mysterious quality of inspiration. The artist reacts to the stimulus of inspiration, rather than acting independently. The last two stanzas reinforce this concept of the artist's passivity, and dependence on an external force:

The wings unheard
felt as a rush of air,
of air withdrawn, the breath
taken -

The blow falls,
feather and bone
stone-heavy.

I am felled,
rise up
with changed vision,
a singing in my ears.

There is a tone of awe in this stanza which suggests that the speaker is in a state of religious worship of the mystery of the creative
process. The elevated language and chant-like rhythm reinforce this concept. Thus, a new dimension is added to the nature of the artist: a sense of awe at the mystical quality of the creative process. This sense of awe can be seen in conjunction with the artist's passivity. Both qualities reinforce the other: the sense of awe contributes to the passive nature of the artist; she cannot take an active part in a process that she doesn't understand.

"Cancion", another passive poem, is about the antithesis of the "I" and the mythic which violates the "I". This poem is concerned with the inter-connection of woman and nature, and the spontaneous arrival of poems. Once again, the artist is portrayed as a passive element in the creative process. The poem details three natural elements, sky, sea and earth, which the woman becomes. With the assumption of each element, the woman feels a corresponding emotion:

When I am the sky
a glittering bird
slashes at me with the knives of song.

When I am the sea
fiery clouds plunge into my mirrors,
fracture my smooth breath with crimson sobbing.

When I am the earth
I feel my flesh of rock wearing down
pebbles, grit, finest dust, nothing.

The poem concludes with the unity of all these elements into the speaker's identity as a woman. She assumes the identity of the
passive artist to whom poems happen:

When I am a woman - 0, when I am a woman,
my wells of salt brim and brim,
poems force the lock of my throat.  

Thus, again, the artist is perceived as a passive part of the creative process: she does not make poems happen, they happen to her. There is the suggestion that the poems possess a life of their own, as they have the autonomy to appear to the poet, uncalled for.

"To the Muse", uses domestic images to portray the Muse as an initially feminine presence who must be courted and eventually wed. The Muse must be persuaded to remain by female gestures of warmth and hospitality:

Who builds a good fire in his hearth shall find you at it with shining eyes and a ready tongue. Who shares even water and dry bread with you will not eat without joy and wife or husband who does not lock the door of the marriage against you, finds you not as unwelcome third in the room, but as the light of the moon on flesh and hair.

The artist is portrayed as lost and helpless without the presence of his Muse. He is passive and dependent in the creative
process. Without the aid of his Muse, he is unable to act, and he suffers an angry impotence:

The host, the housekeeper, it is who fails you. He had forgotten to make room for you at the hearth or set a place for you at the table or leave the doors unlocked for you.

Noticing you are not there (when did he last see you?) he cries out you are faithless, have failed him, writes you stormy letters demanding you return it is intolerable to maintain this great barracks without your presence, it is too big, it is too small, the walls menace him, the fire smokes and gives off no heat.

The artist cannot function alone; he is at the mercy of his Muse whose absence creates chaos and lack of productivity.

In the last part of the poem, the Muse is represented by a gold wedding ring which has been lost in the house. The return of the Muse is symbolized by this ring being restored. Thus, the relationship of the artist and his Muse is compared to a marriage:

a becoming aware a door is swinging, as if perhaps someone had passed through the room a moment ago - looking down, the sight of the ring back on its finger?
In this poem, where the poet is conceived at first as active and responsible, Levertov finally portrays the artist as a passive figure, dependent on the Muse not only for inspiration, but to be able to function at all. In the final stanza the Muse becomes masculine in action, placing the ring on the poet, now his wife. The marriage of the artist and Muse is not an equal relationship; the artist is totally dependent on the Muse whose presence is never certain. The marriage is working when the poet is effectively working.

"The Jacob's Ladder" is one of the transformation poems in which the voice changes from active to passive. The poet initially plays an active part in the process, and becomes passive at the end of the poem. The agony of the creative process is described by comparing the process to a steep stairway made of stone. Levertov emphasizes that art is rooted in concrete human experience by initially describing what the stairway is not:

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.

The angels represent the mysterious and enigmatic aspects of the creative act. The artist is represented as a struggling being who is at the mercy of this mysterious process. When the poem is finally
achieved, it becomes a separate entity, beyond the control of the poet:

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. 22
The poem ascends.

Initially, the poet is active, engaged in "climbing" the staircase.
But, by the end of the poem, the creative process overwhelms him.
The creative act remains mysterious; the poem remains separate and
beyond the reach of the poet, who does not play the dominant role in
the process. Levertov suggest that the artist, rather than incorporating
the process, is incorporated by the process. Because of this, the
poet becomes a spectator in a mysterious process which overwhelms
him.

"The Poem Rising By Its Own Weight" is another poem which links
the active and passive metaphors for creation. The poem is per-
sonified; it becomes a lover or redeemer who rescues the poet from
the pain of the creative process. Thus, Levertov establishes a sensual
relationship between the poet and her poem. Initially the poet is
actively involved, struggling with the agony of creation:

but when your graceful
confident shrug and twist drives the metal
into your flesh and the python grip of it tightens
and you see rust on the chains and blood in your pores
and you roll
over and down a steepness into a dark hole
and there is not even the sound of mockery in the distant air
somewhere above you where the sky was,
no sound but your own breath panting:
then it is that the miracle
walks in, on his swift feet,
down the precipice into the cave,
opens the lock,
knots of chain fall open,
twists of chain unwind themselves,
links fall asunder,
in seconds there is a heap of scrap-
metal at your ankles, you step free and at once
he turns to go — ...

The final stanza demonstrates a radical change in the poet: she
becomes passive and dependent. Her intimacy with the poem is also
evident:

but as you catch at him with a cry,
classing his knees, sobbing your gratitude,
with what radiant joy he turns to you,
and raises you to your feet,
and strokes your disheveled hair,
and holds you,
holds you,
holds you
close and tenderly before he vanishes.

In this poem, which portrays the poet as a combination of lover and
saviour figure, the changing nature of the poet from active to passive
is obvious. Levertov's technique of personifying the poem reinforces
the concept that art has a life of its own, independent of its creator.

An examination of Levertov's poems concerned with the creative
process reveals the emergence of three distinct categories: the active
poems, the passive poems, and the poems which demonstrate a transformation
from the active voice to the passive voice. The majority of the poems reveal the artist as an essentially passive, dependent figure who is controlled by the creative process. Despite the variety of metaphors used to discuss the creative process, the passivity at the core of the process suggests a female point of view. Levertov perceives the poet as a subservient figure who is at the mercy of the whims of his Muse, and his poetry. This passivity causes a dissolution of the artist's individuality; he becomes a passive recipient in the creative act, and thus sacrifices his in this assumption of passivity.

This loss of identity recurs in Levertov's poetry; the familial poems result in a loss of identity when Levertov mythologizes her sister and creates an archetype of her son. In the poems of the sensual voice a loss of identity occurs when Levertov idealizes her husband and lover. In the poems concerned with the creative process, a dominant metaphorical pattern portrays the artist as a passive figure, with a resultant loss of identity. This loss seems to occur at all great moments of experience which signify an aesthetic, religious, or mystical ecstasy.
References


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10. Ibid., p. 39.


12. Ibid., p. 78.

13. Ibid., p. 78.


15. Ibid., p. 41.


17. Ibid., p. 49.


20 Ibid., p. 27.


22 Ibid., p. 37.


24 Ibid., p. 93.
Levertov's social protest poems are primarily concerned with the Viet Nam War. This tends to lessen the impact of these poems. Unlike the poems concerning the familial and sensual voices, and the creative process, which are not dependent on a certain time period, these social protest poems are limited in topic to the mid-1960s. The tendency of these poems is to be narrow in focus and dated. This is especially true of those expressing personal point of view. But there are also poems that abolish point of view in favour of myth, and those which combine mythic and intellectual voices. In varying degrees these poems approach universal human experience and transcend the limits of personality and therefore of time. These poems may be divided into three main categories. The first category consists of personal intellectual poems in which the point of view of the poet is strongly expressed. The second category consists of mythic poems in which a universal theme exists and therefore obliterates any point of view. The third category consists of poems of lyric intensity in which there is a combination of the mythic and intellectual voices. In these poems there is a transformation from the intellectual voice to the mythical voice. In this chapter I will discuss the poems in the following order: first, the personal intellectual poems, second, the mythic poems, and finally, the poems of lyric intensity which combine the intellectual and mythic voices.

"Overheard over S.E. Asia", a personal intellectual poem, personifies napalm to convey the horror of war. The poem is constructed simply
in terms of a question and answer format. The poet initially addresses
the white phosphorous:

'White phosphorous, white phosphorous,
mechanical snow,
where are you falling?'

In the second stanza, the napalm is a stage villain who performs
the function of representing a projection of the poet's point of
view. The poet's antagonism to the war is clearly expressed here.
The agony of war is explicitly conveyed in the answer to the poet's
question:

'I am falling impartially on roads and roofs,
on bamboo thickets, on people.
My name recalls rich seas on rainy nights,
each drop that hits the surface eliciting
luminous response from a million algae.
My name is a whisper of sequins. Ha!
Each of them is a disk of fire,
I am the snow that burns.
I fall
wherever men send me to fall—
but I prefer flesh, so smooth, so dense:
I decorate it in black, and seek
the bone.'

In this poem the point of view is once-removed, barely displaced.
This is a propagandistic use of persona. The napalm is used to
express Levertov's point of view. Her disgust for the war is clearly
conveyed in the grisly images of the second stanza which evoke a
picture of flesh charred by napalm.
"Greeting to the Vietnamese Delegates to the U.N.", also a personal intellectual poem, contrasts the integrity of Vietnam with the corruption of the United States. The poem suggests that this cruel treatment is inevitable, yet, there is an implication that the Vietnamese will eventually triumph due to their courage and principles:

Our large hands
Your small hands

Our country's power
Our powerlessness against it

Your country's poverty
The power of your convictions

Our corrupted democracy
The integrity of your revolution

Our technology and its barbarity
Your ingenuity and simple solutions

Our bombers
Your bicycles

Our unemployed veterans
Your re-educated prostitutes

Our heroin addicts rotting
Your wounded children healing

Our longing for new life
Your building of new life

Our large hands
Your small hands

The subject matter of this poem, which is politics, implies a personal point of view. The form of the poem implies antithesis and rhetoric, though the voice tries to be objective and impersonally descriptive. The point of view is idealization of the Vietnamese revolution and condemnation of American oppression. This is accusation
couched in the form of confession which is basically a very personal
form. Her personifying: "us" is a way of establishing broad guilt,
which is not universal, for idealized Vietnam is exempt. Another
aspect of Levertov's voice in this poem is its naïve simplicity.
The voice neatly dichotomizes a complex issue by assigning total
virtue to the Vietnamese and total evil to Americans. This type of
broad generalization, which inevitably leads to inaccuracy, is one
of the dangers of this type of rhetorical poem. The poet's aim is
propaganda, and her point of view sacrifices any consideration which
does not reinforce the propaganda which is her main concern. The
bias of Levertov's voice is very evident in this poem. Her point
of view equates the United States with corruption, and Vietnam
with integrity.

"The Sun Going Down Upon Our Wrath", another intellectual poem, also
puts forth a specific point of view. Couched in the form of rhetorical
questions, Levertov expresses her view that the young are immune
to the realities of death and destruction. Levertov uses the Holocaust
as an example of mankind's innate cruelty:

You who are so beautiful—
your deep and childish faces,
your tall bodies—

Shall I warn you?

Do you know
what it was to have
a certitude of grasses waving
upon the earth though all
humankind were dust?
Of dust returning
to fruitful dust?
The poem progresses to an ambivalent ending full of hope and despair.

The poet wishes to believe in the possibility of the young believing her warning, but suspects that this is impossible:

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

would your beauty
break into spears of fire,

Fire to turn fire, a wall
of refusal, could there be
a reversal I cannot

hoist myself high enough
to see,
plunge myself deep enough
to know?

The poet's attitude in this poem is one of self-address, as she identifies and sympathizes with the "you" in the poem. Levertov is including herself in her critical warning to the young. She is just as trapped within an unrealistic optimism as the young whom she attempts to warn. The reader, of course, is also part of the audience Levertov is trying to convince with this apocalyptic point of view. There is an argument put forth that the reader can agree with or disagree with. The voice is ambivalent here: hope and despair are both present to reflect the uncertainty of the speaker.

"Life at War", another intellectually focussed poem, advances the poet's personal point of view concerning the discrepancy between man's potential for good and his destructive activities. Levertov
uses grisly images of the destruction of war to heighten this contrast:

the knowledge that humankind,

delicate Man, whose flesh
responds to a caress, whose eyes
are flowers that perceive the stars,

whose music excels the music of birds,
whose laughter matches the laughter of dogs,
whose understanding manifests designs
fairer than the spider's most intricate web,
still turns without surprise, with mere regret
to the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk
runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies,
transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp-fragments,
implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gulleys.

In the concluding lines of the poem Levertov points out the negative
transformative impact of the knowledge of man's capacity to do evil
and contrasts this with the positive impact that living at peace would
have:

Yes, this is the knowledge that jostles for space
in our bodies along with all we
go on knowing of joy, of love;

our nerve filaments twitch with its presence
day and night,
nothing we say has not the husky phlegm of it in the saying,
nothing we do has the quickness, the sureness,
the deep intelligence living at peace would have.

This poem puts forth a particular argument: that man should
resolve the discrepancy between life and killing in his nature and
strive to enjoy "the deep intelligence" that peace would give. The voice of the speaker is readily identifiable as grieving over this tragic discrepancy in human nature. The speaker's grief over the inevitable cruelty of human beings is poignantly conveyed by the grisly images of destruction that she uses. Levertov also laments the huge psychological price that human beings pay for their war-like tendencies. There is a quality of naivete in the poet's implication that living in peace is possible, for mankind has never known a time without war. In this poem, Levertov effectively explores the tragic duality of man: his love of truth and beauty co-exists with his innate need to destroy other human beings.

"The Altars in the Street" is an intellectually focussed poem that describes Vietnamese children building altars in the streets as part of a campaign for non-violent resistance. Levertov contrasts the maiming and destruction of war with the fragile dignity of the altars:

...Where tanks have cracked the roadway
the frail altars shake; here a boy

with red stumps for hands steadies a corner,
here one adjusts with his crutch the holy base.
The vast silence of Buddha overtakes.

and overrules the oncoming roar
of tragic life that fills alleys and avenues;
it blocks the way of pedibabs, police, convoys.

The triumph of spirituality of these altars is detailed in the
concluding image:

...by noon
the whole city in all its corruption,
all its shed blood the monsoon cannot wash away,
has become a temple,
fragile, insolent, absolute.

There is a readily identifiable point of view in this poem. Levertov implies that the idealism and spirituality of the temple builders will triumph over the chaos and destruction of the war. The tone of the poem combines pity for the victims of war with admiration for their tenacity. Here implication is argument, and the reader has the option of agreeing with it, or disagreeing with it. The voice in the poem is one of idealism and metaphysical optimism.

"Advent 1966", another intellectually focussed poem, describes the distortion of Levertov's poetic vision due to the atrocities of the Vietnam War. The poet initially describes her nightmare vision in terms of babies being burned to death. The poet is passive and transfixed before a vision which is compared to "myth" and in some ways exceeds it:

Because in Vietnam the vision of a Burning Babe is multiplied, multiplied, the flesh on fire
not Christ's, as Southwell saw it, prefiguring the Passion upon the Eve of Christmas,
but wholly human and repeated, repeated,
in infant after infant, their names forgotten,
their sex unknown in the ashes,
set alight, flaming but not vanishing,
not vanishing as his vision but lingering,
cinders upon the earth or living on
moaning and stinking in hospitals three abed;

because of this, my strong sight,
my clear caressive sight, my poet's sight I was given
that it might stir me to song,
is blurred.

Levertov then describes in grisly detail the grotesque distortion of
her poetic vision:

There is a cataract filming over
my inner eyes. Or else a monstrous insect
has entered my head, and looks out
from my sockets with multiple vision,

seeing not the unique Holy Infant
burning sublimely, an imagination of redemption,

furnace in which souls are wrought into new life,
but, as off a beltline, more, more senseless figures aflame.

In this poem, point of view dominates the poem; Levertov
is articulating a personal, nightmare vision of distortion of perception
caused by American atrocities in Vietnam. The poet is passively
observing a transformation from a positive myth to its negative opposite.

This vision is so powerful and apocalyptic that it tends to obscure
point of view to some degree.

"Photo Torn from The Times", another intellectually focussed
poem, is an intensely sympathetic reaction to a newspaper story which
describes the death of a ten year old boy in race riots. Levertov
focusses on the mother's despair:

Testimony...
'tears...
in her eyes...
"I am not afraid
of anyone.
Nothing else
can happen to me
now that my son
is dead."
The poetic alters radically from initial sympathy for the bereaved mother to intense admiration of her dignity and beauty:

But the power is there to see, the face of an extreme beauty, contours of dark skin luminous as if candles shone unflickering on beveled oil wood.

Her name, Alluvita, compound of earth, river, life.

She is gazing way beyond questioners.

Her tears shine and don't fall.

The last two couplets convey the enormity and timelessness of the woman's grief. Levertov implies that her tears can't fall because the woman is locked into an eternity of mourning which allows no release. Her loss has given the woman a dignity of detachment which grants her immunity from questioners. By means of her deep, abiding grief, Alluvita is able to transcend secular concerns. In a sense, she becomes mythologized: an eternal mother figure endlessly mourning the death of her child. The displacement of point of view is in this poem lyrical-and dramatic. This powerful portrait of a woman trapped by her grief tends to overshadow point of view, so that it becomes secondary to the drama of the poem's description. As in the previous poem discussed, "The Altars in the Street", the displaced point of view suggests that there is a triumph of human dignity despite the
tragic circumstances. But this poem attains archetypal scope that universalizes its meaning. Levertov presents us with an individual reaction to a tragedy caused by social unrest.

"Weeping Woman", another intellectually focussed poem, uses the symbol of a woman who has lost her right arm to convey the high spiritual price that America will pay for its Vietnamese atrocities. Initially the poem describes in detail what the loss of her right arm means to the mutilated woman:

She is weeping for her lost right arm. She cannot write the alphabet any more on the kindergarten blackboard.

She is weeping for her lost right arm. She cannot hold her baby and caress it at the same time ever again.

She is weeping for her lost right arm. The stump aches and her side.

She is weeping for her lost right arm. The left alone cannot use a rifle to help shoot down the attacking plane.

In the concluding image, Levertov suggests that America will never recover spiritually from its inhumane treatment of the Vietnamese:

In the wide skies over the Delta her right hand that is not there writes indelibly, 'Cruel America,

when you mutilate our land and bodies, it is your own soul you destroy, not ours.'
In this poem there is dramatic displacement of point of view. This elevates the poem from mere rhetoric, even though the drama is staged. There is a lyric magnification of the subject in the concluding image which overshadows point of view. The dramatic portrayal of an amputated right arm writing in the sky is such a powerful image that point of view becomes secondary.

"Scenario", a mythical poem encapsulates the horror of war by concentrating on the plight of a mutilated young woman who symbolizes the suffering of all women destroyed by war. The form is objective narrative with a mythic element. In this poem the mythical structure serves point of view by reinforcing the concept of the horror of war. The framework for the poem is that of a hypothetical theatre set with a design which sums up the grisly destruction of war:

The theatre of war. Offstage
a cast of thousands weeping.

Left center, well-lit, a mound
of unburied bodies,

or parts of bodies. Right,
near some dead bamboo that serves as wings,

a whole body, on which
a splash of napalm is working.

Thus, Levertov has set the stage, with its gruesome design, for the poignant entrance of the bride, a universal symbol of suffering:

Enter the Bride:
She has one breast, one eye,
half of her scalp is bald.

She hobbles towards center front.
Enter the Bridesroom,
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.

In this poem, Levertov has created a microcosm for the terrible suffering
of all Vietnamese women. There is no argument put forth; there is
simply a universal description of the horrors of war. Because of this
universality, there is no personal voice; point of view does not exist
as it does in the intellectually focussed poems.

"Two Variations", another mythical poem, consists of two parts.
The first part, "Enquiry", uses the persona of a young woman who has
lost five children to symbolize the universal bereavement caused
by war. This poem is a mixture of realism and myth; both elements
displace the personal voice. As in the previous poem, myth serves
point of view by emphasizing and enlarging the poet's depiction of
the suffering caused by war. But, in contrast to the intellectually
focussed poems, the viewpoint is not merely personal; it is that of a
large number of people. The structure of the first part is that of
a rhetorical question demanded of American soldiers:

You who go out on schedule
to kill, do you know
there are eyes that watch you,
eyes whose lids you burned off,...
She will outlast you.
She saw
her five young children
writhe and die;
in that hour
she began to watch you,
she whose eyes are open forever.
In the second part, "The Seeing", the speaker adopts the universal maternal voice lamenting the death of children everywhere:

...I see the living
and the dead; the dead are
as if alive, the mouth of
my youngest son pulls my
breast, but there is no milk, he
is a ghost; through his flesh
I see the dying of those
said to be alive, they
eat rice and speak to me but
I see dull earth in them...

This poem represents the universal grief of mothers who have seen their children destroyed by war. The mythical, universal aspect of the poem obliterates an individual voice, and thus, personal point of view disappears.

"Didactic Poem", a poem of lyric intensity, which combines the intellectual and mythical voices, begins with the poet's particular point of view about the nature of evil. Levertov suggests that when man commits an evil act, he is not responding to his will-for-life, but to a death force:

The blood we give the dead to drink
is deeds we do at the will of the dead spirits in us,
not our own live will.
The dead who thirst to speak
had no good of words or deeds when they lived,
or not enough, and were left in longing.
Their longing to speak, their thirst
for the blood of their deeds done by us,
would leave no time, place, force,
for our own deeds, our own
imagination of speech.
Refuse them!
This first part offers a readily identifiable point of view. The concluding part becomes mythical, as Levertov's voice changes from personal to universal:

If we too miss out, don't create our lives, 
invent our deeds, do them, dance 
a tune with our own feet, 
we shall thirst in Hades 
in the blood of our children.

Thus, this poem combines an intellectual attitude with a mythical attitude. This combination gives the poem a depth and range and voice which the other poems discussed lack.

"In Thai Binh (Peace) Province" is another poem of lyric intensity which combines the intellectual and mythical voices. The poem begins with a very personal account of Levertov's reaction to the suffering she saw on her visit to Viet Nam:

I've used up all my film on bombed hospitals, 
bombed village schools, the scattered 
lemon-yellow cocoons at the bombed silk-factory,

and for the moment all my tears too 
are used up, having seen today 
yet another child with its feet blown off, 
   a girl, this one, eleven years old, 
patient and bewildered in her home, a fragile 
small house of mud bricks among rice fields.

So I'll use my dry burning eyes 
to photograph within me 
dark sails of the river boats 
warm slant of afternoon light 
apricot on the brown, swift, wide river...

It is that life, unhurried, sure persistent, 
I must bring home when I try to bring 
the war home. 
Child, river, light.
In these lines the point of view is foremost; the poet obviously is grief-stricken for the suffering of the Vietnamese. Yet her grief is tempered by an admiration for the innately peaceful life-style of the Vietnamese. This personal, intellectual voice becomes universal and mythical in the final part of the poem:

Here the future, fabled bird
that has migrated away from America,
ests, and breeds, and sings,
common as any sparrow.

As in the previous poem discussed, this combination of the intellectual and mythical voices gives the poem a range of voice and a dramatic tension that the poems of the other two categories lack.

An examination of Levertof's poems of social protest reveals the emergence of these three main categories. The third category, the poems of lyric intensity, demonstrates a far more interesting dramatic tension because of the range of voice offered by the combination of the intellectual and mythical voices. In these poems the reader is totally engaged by the transformative process. In the other two categories, the reader's total attention is not engaged. In the mythical poems, the reader responds automatically, subconsciously to a universal truism, but his personal point of view isn't engaged. In the intellectual poems, the reader's point of view is engaged, but his subconscious, his psyche, remains untouched.
References


2. Ibid., p. 8.


5. Ibid., p. 36.


7. Ibid., p. 80.


9. Ibid., p. 87.


11. Ibid., p. 16.


13. Ibid., p. 23.


15. Ibid., p. 29.


17. Ibid., p. 9.


CHAPTER SIX - CONCLUSION
An examination of Leverto\'s four main concerns - the familialvoice, the sensual voice, the creative process, and poems of socialprotest - reveals Leverto\'s varied use of point of view. Point ofview plays an essential role in the impact of a poem because it determines the extent to which the reader is engaged by the poem. The existence of point of view in these poems varies from a strong, readily identifiable point of view to the obliteration of point of view. Point of view sometimes seems dependent upon Leverto\'s subject matter, and is always determined by her authorial intent. When her purpose is to convince the reader of an argument, emphatic personal point of view dominates the poem. When Leverto\'s intention is to universalize an experience, as in many of her sensual poems, point of view is displaced by the mythical aspect of the experience. When she wants immediacy of impact, the sensory images of her lyric mode obliterates point of view, without plumbing the psychological depth of myth. Leverto\'s basic position can be seen as arising out of a dialectic between thesis and antithesis. However, the lyric mode constitutes a third voice which comes into prominence in the anti-war poems. This lyric mode can be defined as a sensory immediate mode which the reader perceives with immediacy, but is not compelled by mythic experience. Since all the senses are involved, the poem is universal and eclipses the - of point of view of the intellectual and personal poem. It can be seen as a compromise between the mythical and personal poems. Its strength derives from the fact that the poems of the lyric mode keep a variety which is true to psychological experience. Within poems of this mode, point of view sometimes varies radically.
An examination of the familial voice demonstrates that Levertov's presuppositions are all traditionally female. The importance of the family and ancestral connections is emphasized. It is obvious in these poems that the writer is celebrating and discovering her technique from the point of view of a woman's experience.

The voice, however, is not uniform in these poems. In the sister poems, Levertov presents us with a complex point of view which conveys the fear and rivalry inherent in her relationship with her sister, Olga. After Olga's death, she becomes a symbol of female suffering. The effect of mythologizing the personal universalizes it, and also creates a means for the poet to escape from the personal, painful aspects of the experience. That is, the speaker loses her personal self in iconic contemplation, and loses the guilt she feels in an experience of awe.

A similar mechanism of escape predominates in Levertov's poems about her son. Through her use of mythological language to describe her son, she neutralizes uncomfortable sexual feelings by transforming her son to the male archetype. In this way, both mother and son become universal symbols of a male-female relationship, with the female traditionally assuming sensations of awe at the male's sexuality.

This mechanism of escape does not function in the poems about her mother for she does not mythologize her mother or create an archetype to portray her. In these poems, which lack the mythological language of the other poems of the Familial voice, the mother clearly emerges as an individual. In these poems the occasional use of the third
person probably indicates an attempt to universalize their relationship, but this attempt fails because these poems are so strongly personal and obviously based on direct experience.

The poet's father is noticeably absent in these poems. I wrote to Ms. Levertov on May 12, 1981 to ask the reason for his absence. Ms. Levertov responded on May 30, 1981 that her father died many years ago, and consequently she did not know him as well as the other members of her family. Ms. Levertov's letter to me denies any deep-rooted psychological problem concerning her father:

My father died in 1954, whereas my mother (who spent a lot of time with me when I was a child as I did lessons at home) lived until 1977, and my son, of course, I hope will outlive me in the natural course of events... My mother's long life naturally gave me far greater opportunity to know her than I had to know my father.

...There is certainly no mystery about it and no psychological hangup.

In her letter, Ms. Levertov referred two poems to me which she claimed were about her father. These two poems, "In Obedience", and "A Ring of Changes" are both to be found in Collected Earlier Poems, published in 1979. Neither poem contained any clear reference to a paternal figure and in fact, the males in both poems could have referred to any male persona. The lack of allusion to her father in two poems which Levertov claims refer to her father reinforce my doubts that there is no existing psychological problem in the poet's relationship with her father. In fact, it is possible to speculate that Levertov experienced a crucial conflict in her relationship with her father which would explain his absence in the poems of the familial voice which deal so thoroughly with the other members of Levertov's family.
The poems of the sensual voice consist of a balance between the mythical poems which do not have a recognizable point of view and the personal poems which have a readily identifiable point of view. There is a mythologizing pattern in the poems of the sensual voice which is similar to the technique employed to mythologize the poet's sister and son. As a result, the speaker becomes distanced from her husband or lover. The technique serves as a means of escape for the speaker. It also universalizes the poems so that readers can more easily identify with the speaker. In these poems, the speaker becomes "everywoman"; she loses her identity as an individual and becomes a figure experiencing the joys and sorrows of all women involved in a love relationship.

In the poems of the creative process, poems vary in point of view from active to passive. There are also individual poems which encompass both the active and passive voices. The artist is primarily a passive, dependent figure who is controlled by the creative process. As a result of this passivity, there is a dissolution of the artist's individuality; as a passive recipient in the creative act, he sacrifices his autonomy. This loss of identity seems to recur in Levertov's poetry, especially at all great moments of experience which signify an aesthetic, religious, or mystical ecstasy.

In the poems of social protest the point of view alternates between personal-intellectual, mythical and lyrical, which is a synthesis of the intellectual and mythical voices. In the "lyrical" poems, the reader's imagination is sensually engaged with great force and immediacy, but his intellectual viewpoint and his deep psyche are not involved.
The alternation of these modes between poems and within poems totally engages the reader by virtue of the dramatic tension created by the transformative process. In the mythical poems, the reader responds automatically, subconsciously to a universal truism, but his personal point of view isn't engaged. In the intellectual poems, the reader's point of view is engaged, but his subconscious, his psyche, remains untouched.

Poetry is most effective when it engages the reader's intellect, his senses and his subconscious. But this seldom, if ever, is achieved at once, regardless of Pound's definition of an image as "an intellectual and in an instant in time." But the whole experience does seem to occur, in Levertov's poems of the lyrical mode when both the active and passive voices, or the personal intellectual voice and the mythical voice are combined to produce a dramatic tension which is all-encompassing.

In these poems examined, Levertov demonstrates a dexterous and skilful use of point of view which conveys a powerful dramatic effect which draws the reader into a convincing argument, or presents him with a universal truism, or most effectively, in the poems of the lyrical mode which combines these two aspects of point of view to totally engage the reader with the poem. One of Levertov's strengths as a poet is her effective use of point of view, which is always appropriate to her subject matter and authorial intent.
1Letter written from Denise Levertov to Dianne Berkeley on May 30, 1981.
Bibliography


Curriculum Vitae

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Born on March 5, 1949 in St. John's, Newfoundland.

Graduated from Grade 13 at Walkerville Collegiate, Windsor, Ontario in 1967.

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