

The sense of this essay rests then upon the concept that sexual love between those of the same sex is one with sexual love between men and women; and that this love is one of the conditions of the fulfillment of the heart's desire and the restoration of man's free nature. Creative work for the common good is one of the conditions of that nature. And our hope lies still in the creative imagination wherever it unites what had been thought divided, wherever it transforms the personal experience into a communal good, "that Brunetto Latini had not been banished from human nature."

1944/1959/1985

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◆ DENISE LEVERTOV ◆  
(1923–1997)

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Denise Levertov's ancestry and upbringing set her apart from most American poets of her generation: She was born in Ilford, England, the daughter of Paul Philip Levertov, a Russian Jew who had become an Anglican minister, and Beatrice Adelaide Spooner-Jones; her most famous ancestors were, on her mother's side, the Welsh tailor and mystic, Angel Jones of Mold and, on her father's side, the Russian rabbi Schneour Zaimon, who was reputed to know the language of birds. Both Denise and her older sister, Olga, were largely educated at home. "As a child," she remembered, "I 'did lessons' at home under the tutelage of my mother and listened to the BBC Schools Programs." She also had a year of nursing school and worked in several London hospitals during World War II.

Denise came early to poetry and at age twelve had the temerity to send some of her poems to T. S. Eliot, who responded with encouragement and advice—unfortunately his letter was lost. In 1946 she published her first book of poems, *The Double Image*, and quickly found that she had several other champions. One of them, the American poet Kenneth Rexroth, would call Levertov "the baby of the new Romanticism."

While still in England, Levertov met and married an American writer, Mitchell Goodman, in 1947. The couple emigrated to the United States the following year, and Levertov became a naturalized citizen in 1955. They had one child, a son.

In America, Levertov set about remaking her poetic voice. She retained a degree of her early Romanticism, but almost immediately felt the influence of Wallace Stevens and Williams Carlos Williams. Her first significant American publications were in magazines associated with the Black Mountain poets, *Origin* and the *Black Mountain Review*. The Black Mountain poets, including Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan, advocated theories of "open" and "organic" forms for poetry, often modeled on the work of Pound and Williams but also indebted to the examples of D. H. Lawrence and Walt Whitman. Although Levertov was never associated with Black Mountain College, she knew several of the poets in Olson's circle and regarded them (especially Duncan) highly.

But Williams, with whom she corresponded from 1951 until 1962, was her primary American mentor. When asked in a 1967 interview to sum up Williams's influence on her work, she replied:

Williams's interest in the ordinary, in the present, in local history as microcosm, in the lives and speech of ordinary people; and his sentimental compassion, which illumined the marvelous in the apparently banal, so deeply affected my "sense of living, of being alive" (which effect is, according to Wallace Stevens [in Adagia], one of the main functions of poetry) that it is impossible for me to measure.

Although Williams's example helped Leverov develop her own strongly enjambed free verse, she preferred to emphasize correspondences between style of writing and attitude toward living as the moral foundation of poetry. Beginning with *Here and Now* (1957) and culminating in *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961) and *O Taste and See* (1964), she developed a poetry focused on epiphanies discovered in ordinary moments and grounded on the sensuous perception of concrete particulars. Her poems often arose from domestic situations like marriage or motherhood, but were increasingly characterized by a spare lucidity. In one poem she wrote, "The best work is made / from hard, strong materials, / obstinately precise. . . ."

As one of only four women poets included in Donald Allen's influential anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960), Leverov gained notice as a leading proponent of the Black Mountain style, even as her ideas about poetry began to diverge from those of Olson, Creeley, and Duncan. Whereas Creeley and Olson argued that "form is never more than the extension of content," Leverov stressed in her 1965 essay "Some Notes on Organic Form" that "form is never more than a *revelation* of content." The religious language here suggests that for Leverov, poetry is a form of spiritual discipline whose practice can lead the poet (and reader) to a visionary apprehension of ordinary experience.

As the decade of the 1960s progressed, Leverov and her husband became deeply involved in the antiwar movement, not only protesting American policy in Vietnam but letting their anger and political commitment become a main focus of their writing. With Muriel Rukeyser and others, Leverov founded Writers and Artists Protest against the War in Vietnam. In books such as *The Sorrow Dance* (1967), *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970), *To Stay Alive* (1971), and *Footprints* (1972), she sometimes questioned her poetics of perception even as she used her skills of evoking the concrete to write poems of protest and outrage. Critics had mixed responses to the political turn her career took. But Leverov saw her political orientation as a natural outgrowth of her engagement with the world. In a 1975 essay, "On the Edge of Darkness: What Is Political Poetry?" she argued for a poetic melding of the personal and the political.

Her subsequent books reach for this goal, fusing her individual experience and perceptions with her consciousness of speaking as a public poet. In *The Freeing of the Dust* (1975) and *Life in the Forest* (1978), she mediates on death, change, the rhythms of nature, and the return of love following her 1972 divorce from Goodman. Her books of the 1980s and

1990s display an increasing concern for environmental problems in the United States and a renewed spiritual dimension, born of her own late conversion to Christianity. By the time of her 1997 death from lymphoma in Seattle, she had won numerous awards for her work and published more than fifty books, including a late collection of autobiographical essays, *Tesserae: Memories and Suppositions* (1995).



## SOME NOTES ON ORGANIC FORM

For me, back of the idea of organic form is the concept that there is a form in all things (and in our experience) which the poet can discover and reveal. There are no doubt temperamental differences between poets who use prescribed forms and those who look for new ones—people who need a tight schedule to get anything done, and people who have to have a free hand—but the difference in their conception of "content" or "reality" is functionally more important. On the one hand is the idea that content, reality, experience, is essentially fluid and must be given form; on the other, this sense of seeking out inherent, though not immediately apparent, form. Gerard Manley Hopkins invented the word *inscape* to denote intrinsic form, the pattern of essential characteristics both in single objects and (what is more interesting) in objects in a state of relation to each other; and the word *instress* to denote the experiencing of the perception of inscape, the *apperception* of inscape. In thinking of the process of poetry as I know it, I extend the use of these words, which he seems to have used mainly in reference to sensory phenomena, to include intellectual and emotional experience as well; I would speak of *the inscape of an experience* (which might be composed of any and all of these elements, including the sensory) or of the inscape of a sequence or constellation of experiences.

A partial definition, then, of organic poetry might be that it is a *method of apperception*, i.e., of recognizing what we perceive, and is based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partrate, and of which man's creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories. Such a poetry is exploratory. How does one go about such a poetry? I think it's like this: First there must be an experience, a sequence or constellation of perceptions of sufficient interest, felt by the poet intensely enough to demand of him their equivalence in words; he is *brought to speech*. Suppose there's the sight of the sky through a dusty window, birds and clouds and bits of paper flying through the sky, the sound of music from his radio, feelings of anger and love and amusement roused by a letter just received, the memory of some long ago thought or event associated with what's seen or heard or felt, and an idea, a concept, he has been pondering, each qualifying the other; together with what he knows about history; and what he has been dreaming—whether or not he remembers it—working in him. This is only a rough outline of a possible moment in a life. But the condition of being a poet is that periodically such a cross-section, or constellation, of experiences (in which one or another element may predominate) demands, or wakes in him this demand, *the poem*. The beginning of the

fulfillment of this demand is to contemplate, to meditate; words which connote a state in which the heat of feeling warms the intellect. To contemplate comes from “templum, temple, a place, a space for observation, marked out by the augur.” It means, not simply to observe, to regard, but to do these things in the presence of a god. And to meditate is “to keep the mind in a state of contemplation”; its synonym is “to muse,” and to muse comes from a word meaning “to stand with open mouth”—not so comical if we think of “inspiration”—to breathe in.

So—as the poet stands open-mouthed in the temple of life, contemplating his experience, there come to him the first words of the poem: the words which are to be his *way in* to the poem, if there is to be a poem. The pressure of demand and the meditation on its elements culminate in a moment of vision, of crystallization, in which some inking of the correspondence between those elements occurs; *and it occurs as words*. If he forces a beginning before this point, it won't work. These words sometimes remain the first, sometimes in the completed poem their eventual place may be elsewhere, or they may turn out to have been only forerunners, which fulfilled their function in bringing him to the words which are the actual beginning of the poem. It is faithful attention to the experience from the first moment of crystallization that allows those first or those forerunning words to rise to the surface: and with that same fidelity of attention the poet, from that moment of being *let in* to the possibility of the poem, must *follow through*, letting the experience lead him through the world of the poem, its unique inscape revealing itself as he goes.

During the writing of a poem the various elements of the poet's being are in communion with each other, and heightened. Ear and eye, intellect and passion, interrelate more subtly than at other times; and the “checking for accuracy,” for precision of language, that must take place throughout the writing is not a matter of one element supervising the others but of intuitive interaction between all the elements involved.

In the same way, content and form are in a state of dynamic interaction; the understanding of whether an experience is a linear sequence or a constellation raying out from and in to a central focus or axis, for instance, is discoverable only *in the work*, not before it.

Rhyme, chime, echo, repetition: they not only serve to knit the elements of an experience but often are the very means, the sole means, by which the density of texture and the returning or circling of perception can be transmuted into language, apperceived. *A* may lead to *E* directly through *B*, *C*, and *D*: but if then there is the sharp remembrance or revisioning of *A*, this return must find its metric counterpart. It could do so by actual repetition of the words that spoke of *A* the first time (and if this return occurs more than once, one finds oneself with a refrain—not put there because one decided to write something with a refrain at the end of each stanza but directly because of the demand of the content). Or it may be that since the return to *A* is now conditioned by the journey through *B*, *C*, and *D*, its words will not be a simple repetition but a variation. . . . Again, if *B* and *D* are of a complementary nature, then their thought- or feeling-rhyme may find its corresponding word-rhyme. Corresponding images are a kind of non-aural rhyme. It usually happens that within the whole, that is between the point of crystallization that marks the beginning or onset of a poem and the point at which the intensity of contemplation has ceased, there are distinct units of awareness; and it is—for me anyway—these that indicate the duration of stanzas. Sometimes these units are of such equal duration that one gets a whole poem of, say, three-line stanzas, a regularity of pattern that looks like, but is not, predetermined.

When my son was eight or nine I watched him make a crayon drawing of a tournament. He was not interested in the forms as such but was grappling with the need to speak in graphic terms, to say, “And a great crowd of people were watching the jousting knights.” There was a need to show the tiers of seats, all those people sitting in them. And out of the need arose a formal design that was beautiful—composed of the rows of shoulders and heads. It is in very much the same way that there can arise, out of fidelity to instress, a design that is the form of the poem—both its total form, its length and pace and tone, and the form of its parts (e.g., the rhythmic relationships of syllables within the line, and of line to line; the sonic relationships of vowels and consonants; the recurrence of images, the play of associations, etc.). “Form follows function” (Frank Lloyd Wright).

Frank Lloyd Wright also wrote that the idea of organic architecture is that “the reality of the building lies in the space within it, to be lived in.” And he quotes Coleridge: “Such as the life is, such is the form.” (Emerson says, “Ask the fact for the form.”) The Oxford Dictionary quotes Huxley (Thomas, presumably) as stating that he used the word *organic* “almost as an equivalent for the word ‘living.’”

In organic poetry the metric movement, the measure, is the direct expression of the movement of perception. And the sounds, acting together with the measure, are a kind of *extended onomatopoeia*—i.e., they imitate, not the sounds of an experience (which may well be soundless, or to which sounds contribute only incidentally)—but the feeling of an experience, its emotional tone, its texture. The varying speed and gait of different strands of perception within an experience (I think of strands of seaweed moving within a wave) result in counterpointed measures.

Thinking about how organic poetry differs from free verse, I wrote that “most free verse is failed organic poetry, that is, organic poetry from which the attention of the writer had been switched off too soon, before the intrinsic form of the experience had been revealed.” But Robert Duncan pointed out to me that there is a “free verse” of which this is not true, because it is written not with any desire to seek a form, indeed perhaps with the longing to *avoid* form (if that were possible) and to express inchoate emotion as purely as possible. There is a contradiction here, however, because if, as I suppose, there is an inscape of emotion, of feelings, it is impossible to avoid presenting something of it if the rhythm or tone of the feeling is given voice in the poem. But perhaps the difference is this: that free verse isolates the “rightness” of each line or cadence—if it seems expressive, O.K., never mind the relation of it to the next; while in organic poetry the peculiar rhythms of the parts are in some degree modified, if necessary, in order to discover the rhythm of the whole.

But doesn't the character of the whole depend on, arise out of, the character of the parts? It does; but it is like painting from nature: suppose you absolutely imitate, on the palette, the separate colors of the various objects you are going to paint; yet when they are closely juxtaposed in the actual painting, you may have to lighten, darken, cloud, or sharpen each color in order to produce an effect equivalent to what you see in nature. Air, light, dust, shadow, and distance have to be taken into account.

Or one could put it this way: in organic poetry the *form sense*, the *tragic sense*, as Stefan Wolpe speaks of it, is ever present *along with* (yes, paradoxically) fidelity to the revelations of meditation. The form sense is a sort of Stanislawsky of the imagination: putting a chair two feet downstage there, thickening a knot of bystanders upstage left, getting this actor to raise his voice a little and that actress to enter more slowly; *all in the interest of a total form he intuitis*. Or it is a sort of

helicopter scout flying over the field of the poem, taking aerial photos and reporting on the state of the forest and its creatures—or over the sea to watch for the schools of herring and direct the fishing fleet towards them.

A manifestation of form sense is the sense the poet's ear has of some rhythmic norm peculiar to a particular poem, from which the individual lines depart and to which they return. I heard Henry Cowell tell that the drone in Indian music is known as the *horizon note*. Al Kresch, the painter, sent me a quotation from Emerson: "The health of the eye demands a horizon." This sense of the beat or pulse underlying the whole I think of as the horizon note of the poem. It interacts with the nuances or forces of feeling which determine emphasis on one word or another, and decides to a great extent what belongs to a given line. It relates the needs of that feeling-force which dominates the cadence to the needs of the surrounding parts and so to the whole.

Duncan also pointed to what is perhaps a variety of organic poetry: the poetry of linguistic impulse. It seems to me that the absorption in language itself, the awareness of the world of multiple meaning revealed in sound, word, syntax, and the entering into this world in the poem, is as much an experience or constellation of perceptions as the instress of non-verbal sensuous and psychic events. What might make the poet of linguistic impetus appear to be on another tack entirely is that the demands of his realization may seem in opposition to truth as we think of it; that is, in terms of sensual logic. But the apparent distortion of experience in such a poem for the sake of verbal effects is actually a precise adherence to truth since the experience itself was a verbal one.

Form is never more than a *revelation* of content.

"The law—one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception." I've always taken this to mean, no *loading of the rifts with ore*, because there are to be no rifts. Yet, alongside of this truth is another truth (that I've learned from Duncan more than from anyone else)—that there must be a place in the poem for rifts too—(never to be stuffed with imported ore). Great gaps between perception and perception which must be leapt across if they are to be crossed at all. The X factor, the magic, is when we come to those rifts and make those leaps. A religious devotion to the truth, to the splendor of the authentic, involves the writer in a process rewarding in itself; but when that devotion brings us to undreamed abysses and we find ourselves sailing slowly over them and landing on the other side—that's ecstasy.

1965

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## LOUIS SIMPSON

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(B. 1923)

Louis Simpson's life and work are marked by frequent changes. Like many other poets of his generation, he began as a formalist, often using rhyme and meter, but in midcareer he underwent a radical aesthetic transformation. For awhile associated with "deep image" poets like James Wright and Robert Bly, he has in recent decades emerged as a poet of free verse suburban narratives, frequently told with a Chekhovian obliqueness and humor. As such, he has produced his most distinctive and original work—understated, even prosaic, conveying aspects of contemporary American life most poets rarely touch upon.

Yet Simpson had the upbringing of an English colonial schoolboy. Born in Jamaica, he was the second son of Aston Simpson, a prosperous lawyer, and Rosalind Marantz Simpson, a Russian Jewish immigrant who had been a dancer and aspiring opera singer. (His mother later called herself De Marantz to give an aristocratic air to her business ventures.) His privileged childhood did not impede his awareness of racial and class differences on the island, and his mother's stories of Russia were fraught with poverty and suffering. When Simpson was seven, his parents divorced. "No one explained it to me—one day I had a mother, the next she was gone." She moved away to Toronto and New York. In addition to this trauma, Louis and his brother did not get along with their stepmother and her children. They were soon alienated from their own home. At age nine he began to attend Munro College, a boarding school a hundred miles away. In various memoirs he described the strict, traditional curriculum and his budding love of literature.

While publishing poems as a teenager, Simpson thought of joining his mother in New York. When his father died suddenly of complications from diabetes, Louis and his brother learned that they had been left out of the family estate. At age seventeen, Louis left Jamaica for New York and a new life. At Columbia University he studied with Lionel Trilling and Mark Van Doren. When America entered World War II, Simpson decided to ignore his foreign birthright, registered for the draft, and in 1943 was inducted into the U.S. Army. For the next three years he served in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, seeing combat in Normandy, Holland, Belgium, and Germany. He was awarded both the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star with Oak Leaf for valor,