Chapter 2

Levertov: “Testimonies of lived life”

Denise Levertov’s familial religious legacy and literary lineage, we have seen, made it difficult for her to become anything but a believer. She was, one may say, predestined to come to the faith. A chronological study of her poetry offers readers a clear reflection of the evolution that she had undergone in her spiritual life. Her work traces her movement from agnosticism to faith, a specific Christian faith in the reality of God who accomplished his unsurpassable act of revelation in Jesus Christ. In an article entitled “A Poet’s View” in Religion and Intellectual Life (1984), we have a statement by the poet herself, of this turn that is so evident in her later poetry:

I have been engaging, then, during the last few years, in my own version of the Pascalian wager, and finding that an avowal if Christian faith is not incompatible with my aesthetic nor with my political stance, since as an artist I was already in the service of the transcendent, and since Christian ethics (however betrayed in past and present history) uphold the same values I seek in a politics of racial and economic justice and nonviolence. (NSE 243)

Levertov also says that the relation between her religious and her intellectual position appears “to be a process”. She speaks of “a slow and continuing personal evolution [. . .] although the direction of [her]
development has [. . .] been consistent” (NSE 239-240). Supposing her poetry to be a reflection, at least in part, of her spiritual evolution, one may mark out the various stages or phases involved in the process.

Levertov states: “In the matter of religion [. . .] I have moved in the last few years from a regretful skepticism [. . .] to a position of Christian belief. [. . .] [T]he movement has been [. . .] gradual and continuous [. . .] (NSE 241-242). Though her movement to faith was a gradual progression through almost as many stages as there are collections of her poetry, each collection reflecting a particular stage, for the sake of convenience and ease, the present study considers three significant stages – the periods of agnosticism, transition, and belief.

Levertov’s is a poetry of exploration, an endeavour to decipher daily experience. From the very beginning of her poetic career, she emphasizes “the incapacity of reason alone to comprehend experience, and considers Imagination the chief of human faculties” (NSE 246). In her poetry of exploration, Levertov seeks to discover the mystery that lies beyond the surface of things and in the process gains an increasing conviction that the exercise of the imagination moves one toward faith. Her thematic concerns are reflected in the lines:

I like to find
what’s not found
at once, but lies
within something of another nature,
in repose, distinct. (WE 17)
As she explores her daily experience of the world and the mystery behind things in her early collections, in what seems in retrospect her period of agnosticism, she is concerned with an internal and natural mystery rather than a transcendent or metaphysical one. The influence of Hasidism is most conspicuous in this early phase of Levertov’s spiritual life.

Levertov’s concern, as she explores every aspect and event in her daily life, is not merely with the event but with the meaning of an experience. She believes here, as throughout her career, that every experience must have a meaning and that all experience relates in some way to the truth which she refers to as the “the authentic” (JL 59). We see, therefore, that a search for the authentic underlies all her work. It is only an experience with meaning that she considers a proper subject for a poem. Thus, through poetry, she attempts to reach to the heart of things. As N. E. Condini remarks in “Embracing Old Gods”: “With polished style, Miss Levertov pries into things, objects, plants, to their last detail, their most hidden secret” (Contemporary Literary Criticism, 28: 242).

Levertov’s encounter with truth leads to her affirmation of joy in the physical world. As an agnostic, she perceives merely the truths of change and coherence, and places faith in the inevitability of joy renewed. She believes too, in the recreating and renewing power of Nature, which for her is Truth. She perceives an order and significance behind the surface chaos in the world, and an accord among living things. Here there is no talk of God or religion even though she has a sense of otherness, of the common bond of
humanity, and gives spiritual significance to the natural exercise of pity, mercy, peace, and love.

Levertov’s truths in *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* are the truths of change and coherence that are revealed in small as well as grand moments. The poem “Matins” from the *Jacob’s Ladder* clearly expresses Levertov’s ideas about poetry and meaning and throws light on her search for the authentic. The poem is initiated by the memory of a dream that happens just before waking and offers the poet shadows of the authentic whose nature is imprecisely recognized:

It thrusts up close. Exactly in dreams
it has you off-guard, you
recognize it before you have time.
For a second before waking
the alarm bell is a red conical hat, it
takes form. (*JL* 59)

The shadow of the dream persists as the poet takes up her morning activities and she seeks to recognize the authentic:

The authentic! I said
rising from the toilet seat.
The radiator in rhythmic knockings
spoke of the rising steam.
The authentic, I said
breaking the handle of my hairbrush as I
brushed my hair in
rhythmic strokes: That’s it,
that’s joy, it’s always
a recognition, the known
appearing fully itself, and
more itself than one knew. (JL 59)

The feminine experiences of the morning world are used to reach
“Marvelous Truth” itself.

Marvelous Truth, confront us
at every turn,
in every guise, iron ball,
egg, dark horse, shadow,
cloud
of breath on the air
dwell
in our steaming bathrooms, kitchens full of
things to be done, the
ordinary streets.

Thrust close your smile
that we know you, terrible joy. (JL 62)

Levertov explores every aspect of the world around in her quest for
the real. She believes, as she writes in “A Straw Swan Under the Christmas
Tree”, that
All trivial parts of
world-about-us speak in their forms
of themselves and their counterparts! (WE 32)

Truth and reality – the authentic – are to be encountered in everyday life. In order to do so, one must also be sensitive to the other side of experience, to the dreams and visions that the mind knows, and be able to relate the two. Only in this way, the poem has taught her, can a person know “terrible joy”. As Levertov writes in “Some Notes on Organic Form,”

A religious devotion to 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. (NSE 73)

It is from her Hasidic roots that Levertov inherits this sense of joy in the physical world. The affirmation of joy in her early poetry marks a stage in her movement to faith, for Hasidism is a Jewish mystical sect that sees God as immanent in creation and shows men the way to a God who dwells in their midst. It is interesting to note here that Levertov later comes to a position of Christian (Christ-centred) belief, that Christ’s name – Emmanuel – means ‘God with us’, and that his birth was announced as “good news of great joy that shall be for all the people” (Luke 2:10).

In her early collections from *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* through *Relearning the Alphabet*, Levertov produces a detailed record of
experience in which the perceiving mind, confronting the apparent
ordinariness of the world, is continually surprised by joy. However, for
Levertov the agnostic, the joy that she attains through her encounter with
truth in everyday life is not a religious joy. As Richard Howard points out,
“for her the poem is a sacramental transaction, permitting, even enforcing
access to a released state of being, an ecstatic awareness that is not
concomitant to a religion, with its stern implications of community and
service, as to a gnosis” (Contemporary Literary Criticism, 5: 246).

Levertov’s poetry is one of revolution where she seeks new ways of
affirming joy. In “The Wife”, one of many poems where she writes about her
relationship with her husband, she says:

I don’t stop to ask myself

Do I love him? but

laugh for joy. (WE 48)

Many of her earlier poems are hymns to joy, which the poet even in her
latest stage considers the best protection against the aridity of war and the
painful memories associated with it. While writing on her early political
poetry in “Revolutionary Love: Denise Levertov and the Poetics of Politics,”
Sandra M. Gilbert aptly remarks, “In an age of psychic anxiety and
metaphysical angst, Denise Levertov’s most revolutionary gesture is
probably her persistent articulation of joy – joy in the self, delight in life,
sheer pleasure in pure being” (Contemporary Literary Criticism, 66: 235).
It is from Hasidism that Levertov inherits a deep-rooted humanism and an ethical concern and an equally deep-rooted respect for the creation, this world, as an abode of holiness. *With Eyes at the Back of our Heads, The Jacob’s Ladder,* and *O Taste and See* impress us with her serene delight in the world and pleasure in making poems that celebrate the world. There is a vague sense of social malaise, though, as she begins to confront evil in the world. This is significant with regard to Levertov’s movement to Christian faith, for it stemmed naturally and inevitably from her humanitarian concerns and her sense of social responsibility. Beginning with *The Jacob’s Ladder* we see her writing poems that take their subjects directly from contemporary social issues and centre on the appropriate inner response to the issue. As we understand from the collections of poems that follow, hers was “a politics of racial and economic justice and non-violence” (*NSE* 243). In her early poetry, though, evil is conceived merely as the absence of good. “During the Eichmann Trial” is a poem in which her social ethical concern is very evident. Here she characterizes the man who ordered the murder of millions of people in Nazi concentration camps as a pitiful man whom none pity, whom all must pity if they look into their own face. (*JL* 63)

Using the words of St. Paul from the Epistle to the Romans she implies that we are all “members / one of another.” She asks every man to look up “from
his being” to the being of others. This sense of “otherness” has Hasidic roots. What makes Eichmann a murderer is his inability to see this common bond of humanity:

He stands
isolate in a bullet proof
witness-stand of glass,
a cage where we may view
ourselves, an apparition
telling us something he
does not know: we are members
one of another. (JL 65)

A recurrent theme in Levertov that has Hasidic roots is about being where we are and still doing all we can. She believed in fulfilling “the poet’s total involvement in life,” for the “earthly life, that miracle of being” is something that poetry “conserves and celebrates” (NSE 136). In the poem “Sparks” in the collection O Taste and See, she includes lines from the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible to state her own convictions:

Whatsoever thy hand
findeth to do, do it with thy might:
[....................]
Prepare for this world as thou
shouldst live forever.’ (OT 15)
The concern of living life to the fullest is central to her work. With a truly Epicurean perspective, she believes that only life experienced completely can enrich man. This concept is the major theme of *O Taste and See*, the title poem of which begins: “The world is / not with us enough / O taste and see.” Life may be ordinary but man must move deeper into the present day, tasting and seeing

[. . .] all that lives
to the imagination’s tongue,
grief, mercy, language,
tangerine, weather, to
breathe them, bite,
savor, chew, swallow, transform

into our flesh our
deaths, crossing the street, plum, quince,
living in the orchard and being
hungry, and plucking
the fruit. (*OT* 53)

In the words of “a woman with crooked heels” in the poem “February Evening in New York,”

‘You know, I’m telling you, what I love best
is life. I love Life! Even if I ever get
to be old and wheezy – or limp! You know?

Limping along? – I’d still . . .’ (*WE* 31)
As Linda Welshimer Wagner opines in “Matters of the Here and Now,” Levertov’s poems speak consistently for her solemn view of life: “She sees life as renewing, joyful, majestic; a promise to be held tenderly; a duty to be performed earnestly; and her poetry, as an art originating in, and expressive of that mysteriously compelling vision” (Contemporary Literary Criticism, 5: 247).

Sandra M. Gilbert believes that Levertov’s delight in existence depends on the steady celebratory patience of the believer who trusts that if you wait long enough, if you abide despite forebodings, the confirming moment of epiphany will arrive. “Thus she assimilates [. . .] metaphysical anxieties [. . .] into a larger pattern based on faith in the inevitability of joy renewed” (Contemporary Literary Criticism, 66: 239). For instance, she marvels at the way she can carry on despite the “Terror” she has experienced:

If I remember, how is it
my face shows
barely a line? Am I
a monster, to sing
in the wind on this sunny hill
and not taste the dust always,
and not hear
that rending, that retching?
How did morning come, and the days
that followed, and quiet nights? (WE 36)
Levertov’s value of the present life stems from her assumption that the world is orderly and that man, animal and spirit all partake in this great order of which nature itself is the best revelation. She writes thus:

The religious sense – pantheism – the impulse to kneel – seems to me basic human reality… the kind of Christianity George Herbert wrote about […] At the same time I feel with Thoreau that “The love of Nature and the fullest perception of the revelation which she is to man is not incompatible with the belief in the peculiar revelation of the Bible.” (qtd. in Wagner 41)

Levertov’s poetry is concerned with seeing into experience and discovering the order and significance that is there behind the surface chaos, an instinct gained from her poet’s faith. It is, therefore, a poetry of the eye; of the mental and spiritual eye. In the title poem of With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads Levertov points the way to see with our whole sight. With eyes at the back of our heads, one is better able to recognize and imagine essential interrelationships; one is enabled to see in unexpected directions and thereby handle the chaos in the world around. Here Levertov is writing less about heightened external sight than about inner vision.

It is because of her strong faith in innate order that images of nature have always dominated Levertov’s poems. She shares with Wordsworth a sense of the importance of man’s relationship to nature. However, as Karl Malkoff observes in Crowell’s Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry,
[. . .] while Wordsworth is concerned primarily with a reality unmarred by civilization, Levertov’s interest extends to the entire sensory world. More important, where Wordsworth seeks in nature permanent forms that relate significantly to human experience, Levertov is committed to the act of perceiving in and of itself. She is involved with “[. . .] all that lives / to the imagination’s tongue,” she wishes to “breathe them, bite, / savor, chew, swallow, transform / into our flesh our / deaths [. . .]” (176)

Levertov writes in “A Poet’s View,” that an “acknowledgement, and celebration, of mystery probably constitutes the most consistent theme” of her poetry from its very beginnings (NSE 146). With the publication of O Taste and See Levertov’s interest in the meditative, the spiritual, and the mystical grows clearer. “The religious response to a mystery is celebration, not explanation,” says Paul A. Lacey in The Inner War: Forms and Themes in Recent American Poetry (114). A good portion of Levertov’s poetry is given to celebrating colours and flavours. Says George Bowering in his article “Denise Levertov”:

The celebration of the senses is not done under the eye of a reproachful or paternal God. The modern poet does not often call God by that name except for irony or rhetoric. Denise Levertov seeks unstated spiritual significance in emotional honesty, precise attention to the natural exercise of pity, mercy,
peace and love. Not that God is dead, unless by that is meant that he no longer wears the Talmudic and Mosaic disguises and fright-beards. (Gelpi 245)

In the period of agnosticism, Levertov hardly ever speaks of the God of the Old Testament, but brings pagan gods into her poetry. In “The Prayer” she says:

At Delphi I prayed
to Apollo
that he maintain in me
the flame of the poem
and I drank of the brackish spring there [ . . . ]
until at dusk
among the stones of the goatpaths
breathing dust
I questioned my faith, or
within it wondered
if the god mocked me [ . . . ]

I think sometimes not Apollo heard me
but a different god. (OT 55)

In “Earth Psalm” she worships the mortal after saying that she “could replace / God for awhile”: 
God is replaced awhile,
awhile I can turn from that slow embrace
to worship ‘mortal’, the summoned
god who has speech, who has wit
wrapped in sad pelt and without hope of heaven [...] (OT 60)

A study of the early collections of the first phase dealt with so far reveals, on the one hand, poems that reflect on the sources of art and imagination, and on the other, poems that press forward on a spiritual journey whose purpose is to uncover the nature of self and its destiny. In the title poem of With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads for instance, we are given a parable of the inner life, a metaphorical presentation of spiritual pilgrimage in the individual. Levertov looks for ways of attaining spiritual wholeness in a world that is fragmented and chaotic. Her quest for the authentic and her exploration of experience leads her ultimately to the recognition of her own person, a ready awareness of her self. In this early phase of Levertov’s career, her poems reflect her agnosticism. However, they also reveal the seeds of her movement to faith. At the end of this phase though, the search is still on for she only reaches a stage wherein God is “replaced awhile” and she turns “to worship mortal” and acknowledge the truths of Nature, change and coherence (OT 60).

While Levertov’s early work devotes its attention to the balanced seeing and savouring of life, because of the Vietnam War, the same cannot be said of the volumes – The Sorrow Dance, Relearning the Alphabet, and
To Stay Alive. The war casts a shadow over her, resulting in a loss of authenticity. Eventually, though, as Footprints, The Freeing of the Dust and Life in the Forest reveal, through struggle and growth Levertov gains a new spiritual understanding.

The Sorrow Dance speaks of sorrow and the dominant tone is grief, not only in poems about the death of Olga, the poet’s sister, and the Vietnam War, but even in the poems rejoicing in the natural world. In this collection, we get “Perspectives” (SD 65) on everyday life as well as portraits of “Life at War” (SD 79) in our lives. “The Pulse” and “Life at War” set out her primary theme on war – the loss of poetic vision and poetic power. In “The Closed World” she writes, “[. . .] the blinds are down over my windows, / my doors are shut” (SD 62). This is the consequence of personal sorrow at the death of her sister, and the horrors she perceives in the world, in particular, the Vietnam War. The feeling flowing out of her poems on war reveals that she has encountered evil in a way it had not been encountered before, and the effect has been profound. For instance, “Life at War” presents the paradox that Man, “whose flesh /responds to a caress, whose eyes / are flowers that perceive the stars,” can feel nothing more than “mere regret” about

[. . .] 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-gullies. (SD 80)
However, for Levertov, the dance of sorrow does not dispel joy. “Knowledge” of hideous crimes of war, she writes, “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. (SD 80)

Levertov points toward a way of comprehending the violence of war that modern men “have breathed the grits of” all their lives, their “dreams / coated with it, the imagination / filmed over with the gray filth of it” (SD 79). Through her exploration of public events, family memories, and personal relationships in this collection, she points toward a way of comprehending the violence of war, and enables her readers to recognize their human flaws as well as possibilities:

The honey of man is
the task we’re set to: to be
‘more ourselves’
in the making: (SD 82)

In Relearning the Alphabet, most poems are devoted to terror, despair, sorrow, anger, and pain, although joy is the emotion she cherishes, and she has written a number of love poems. The poet is helpless in the face of the mysteries she perceives in the present. The ineffective struggle against the
war brings a new desolation and emptiness, and hopelessness echoes throughout this collection. In “Biafra” she writes:

no hope: Don’t know

what to do: Do nothing. (RA 18)

In “An Interim” she writes:

While the war drags on, always worse,

The soul dwindles sometimes to an ant

Rapid upon a cracked surface; (RA 21)

There is also a longing for death surfacing through the book. In James Mersmann’s opinion:

Flirtation with death seems part of a desire to escape the burden of guilt and inadequacy imposed by the war and the culture – “(Unlived life / of which one can die)” [. . .] it is part of the dark night of the soul forcing it toward the necessary cessation of struggle, the passivity needed for the rekindling of the fire. (105)

Eventually, Levertov’s joy-seeking temperament prompts her toward losing anger, sorrow, and despair in an effort to create conditions more conducive to joy. Following the confusion and questioning of earlier poems like “From a Notebook”, “Relearning the Alphabet” feels more satisfying and heartening. At the beginning of the poem “Relearning the Alphabet”, Levertov is estranged from self and world and suffers loss of authenticity. She has changed continents and cultures and is “without a terrain in which,
to which, I belong” (RA 97). However, the dominant tone here is optimistic and the poem begins and ends with the key words in Levertov’s earlier poetry - “joy” and “praise”.

As a result of the war and the revolution, Levertov gains a new spiritual understanding. Certain poems of Relearning the Alphabet finally show the spiritual depth expected from a poet with such a strong Hasidic background. Through defeat and death of the will, Levertov relearns a new peace and hope and a sense of human possibility. Her spiritual heritage helps her to bring on the new light. It is indeed a spiritual autobiography, for, as Lacey remarks:

In “Relearning the Alphabet” the final relinquishment occurs, the recognition that “acts of magic” and “articles of faith” are “rules of the will graceless / faithless,” and that she must yield all desire, all yearning for vision or wisdom, before the treasure will disclose itself. And the treasure is a new trust, a recognition that holiness is both in the world and in the self.

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To Stay Alive reveals Levertov’s growing bitterness about the war and the state of the American soul. The anti-Vietnam war poems reveal a righteous indignation and an uncompromising moral zeal. Commenting on this collection, Marie Borroff writes, “The time-honored impulse to celebrate, to wonder, to sing is basic in her, and this impulse is, literally, disturbed by the knowledge that an inassimilable evil exists which must be hated and
which must be fought on the level of action (rpt. in Contemporary Literary Criticism 2: 243).

The poetic sequence “Staying Alive” reveals Levertov’s struggle to find a proper order and place for her poems and for her life. She sees herself as a poet in a world that requires revolutionaries. However, as a poet, she is unable to be the kind of revolutionary she wants to be. To Stay Alive is a record of her struggle to reconcile these two roles and to choose between “Revolution or Death” (SA 28). In “Prologue: An Interim” she pronounces herself guilty of being a poet in a time when poetry seems useless: “And all I can bring forth out of my anger is a few flippant rhymes” (SA 25). She feels that her poetry is insignificant against the ultimate horror of the war and the detrimental effect that the war has on the language, the only tool she thinks she can use well.

To Stay Alive reveals the many questions troubling her and the answers come finally, from within herself, through her personal experience of both the physical, external world and the spiritual or internal world. In spite of her growing bitterness and sense of helplessness, we find that Levertov’s humanity is still very much warm and alive. As Juhasz observes, “Only through an engagement with herself, sensual and spiritual events show her, can she participate in the actions of others, can those actions have any meaning for her” (81).

Footprints, her next collection, is all about understanding the times and surviving them. The prosaic poems record impressions and talk about
experiences, while the political poems are simply statements of the poet’s convictions. For Levertov, the artist’s involvement with public affairs is part of a total involvement with the life he lives and the world in which he lives it. *Footprints* openly shows struggle and growth while taking a tough look at harsh contemporary events. The book also picks up threads of her work, which had been partially set aside in favour of the urgency of political commitment prevailing in *Relearning the Alphabet* and *To Stay Alive*. Regarding her choice of materials here Richard Pevear remarks:

> The imagistic and dream-vision poems in *Footprints* have a natural piety that tends towards animism. [. . .] They also contain reveries about a primitive, magical life [. . .]. Behind all of this there is an awareness of the essential relationship between the struggle for a more authentic vision and the struggle for a more authentic world [. . .]. (rpt. in Contemporary Literary Criticism 3: 293)

*The Freeing of the Dust* written after Levertov’s trip to North Vietnam with fellow poet Muriel Rukeyser is “a book about throwing open the doors and windows of the imagination and letting in the air, noise and stampede of the ‘life of others,’” according to Bonnie Costello in her article “Flooded with Otherness” (*Parnassus* 8: 206). It contains poems about a way of looking at life that we never before met in her work. The political poems are placed between two sections that deal with private themes to show how public events interrupt our lives. In this collection, we find that Levertov has
changed. There is an acceptance of limits, without the bitterness expected from a disillusioned humane idealist. “Rather,” says David Ignatow “there is a sweetness, a tenderness towards life; a change rises from her poems that is inspiring to read. For Levertov, the circle of human frailty has been completed and forgiven and even blessed, because of life [. . .]” (rpt. in Contemporary Literary Criticism, 8: 348). Much of the rancour of her former social poetry has mellowed and bitterness has given way to a tranquility of “A Place of Kindness” where

[. . .] someone slow is moving,
stumbling from door to chair
to sit there patiently
doing nothing but be,

enjoying the quiet and warmth, (FD 32)

Even the Vietnamese poems in this book emphasize reflective scenes. While being there shocks the senses, deepens the rage, and burns images of loss into the poet’s consciousness, she also gains a view of the quiet moments that surround the horrific. She can see what it means “To live / beyond survival,” even amidst the devastations of war. Commenting on the more quiet, satisfied tone of the poems in The Freeing of the Dust, Linda Wagner remarks in a review of this collection:

Such a change from relative stridency to careful repose suggests not that Levertov’s views have changed but rather that this collection of poems expresses the core of any writer’s
effectiveness: the humanity that forces one to take stands, the
‘angst’ of seeing and living in a world that seldom meets ideal
standards, but too the joy of glimpsing fulfillment at least
occasionally. (Wagner-Martin 36)

Just as the poet’s expanding outer experience deepens her public
understanding, the intensity of private experiences deepens her discovery of
herself. At about this time she confronts her own dissolving marriage in the
early 1970s, and amidst the pain finds the same spirit of renewal. Her verses
at this time are not self-indulgent revelations but dignified poems revealing
her experience of living at “Crosspurposes” (FD 54), “Divorcing” (FD 66),
and of “Living Alone” (FD 59). Having explored in The Freeing of the Dust the
need to look outward to the world to know another, and inward to
comprehend and accept the self, she comes to a recognition in recounting a
“Conversation in Moscow” (FD 85) that:

we mustn’t, any of us, lose touch with the source,
pretend it’s not there, cover over
the mineshaft of passion
despair somberly tolls its bell
from the depths of,
and wildest joy
sings out of too,
flashing
the scales of its laughing,
improbable music,
grief and delight entwined in the dark down there. (FD 91)
Life in the Forest is a stock taking book in which we find transitions as well as continuations, and everywhere in this splendid collection we find the seed of change. In this, her most autobiographical book, Levertov rediscovers beginnings amidst endings, and speaks of living as a daughter, mother, writer, teacher, with others and alone, and suggests that we are constantly changing.

In this collection, which is not primarily political, the political poems appear in a section called “Continuum,” and reveal the concern of the poet for the brutality she sees about her and her deep reverence for the human body and spirit. She cannot bear that mankind keeps refusing its potentials for understanding, for greatness, and that human beings become vessels of violence and degradation. As Diane Wakoski says in “Song of Herself,” the poem “Continuum” expresses Levertov’s

[. . .] connecting, joining belief – both in human faith and in the anger that human beings’ lapses from faith provoke. Another dimension of her sense of life as process, life as testing ground, is that human kind draws from, and in turn sustains the natural world. Many of her metaphors are drawn from nature, and many of her most effective allegories conjoin the natural and the human. (Wagner-Martin 55)

“Continuum” begins with the description of a beetle representative of the voice of the commonplace poet:
Some beetle trilling
its midnight utterance.
Voice of the scarabee,
dungroller,
working survivor . . . (LF 63)

There is in Levertov an insistence on the need to watch nature as it incessantly recreates life according to N. E. Condini. Nature is truth, for Levertov, and this concept is taken up again in Life in the Forest where “mother and the forest symbol – stand for the inevitability of death and the permanence of creation” (Contemporary Literary Criticism 28:242).

Central to this collection are a series of poems about the death of her mother, dying “at home, yet far away from home, / thousands of miles of earth and sea, and ninety years / from her roots” (LF 26). Levertov knows that the physical marks individuals make on their environments – reflections of themselves and their values – rarely outlast them and sometimes disappear beforehand. She depicts the rapid disintegration of the garden her mother had created after only a few weeks of neglect during her mother’s illness in the poem “Death in Mexico”. While the landscape – an embodiment of the archetypal Garden – is returning to its natural jungle state, Levertov sees in its ruin a primitive reality:

Gardens vanish. She was an alien here,
as I am.

[.................................]
Old gods took back their own. (LF 33)

“This is what must be feared,” remarks Diane Wakoski:

that in death, in each personal death, civilization as we know it dies. Perhaps the “old gods” are the body, the physical world, always there and always with a primitive power and potentially dangerous capability. Like all mystics, Levertov believes in a God or the knowledge of a God within oneself, which is beyond doctrine and organized religion. Sometimes this God takes the face of art or civilization or government or human will, but the marrying of those two elements, the body and the spirit, must be a marrying of the “old gods” and the personal god. “Life in the forest” will always be dangerous and primitive, but we cannot resist the beauty of the snake.

(Wagner-Martin 56)

As Levertov explores the implications of mortality, she withdraws into herself and wrestles with her doubts, contemplating the nature of identity, commitment and change. In her pain, she offers up a “Death Psalm“ to the Lord of mysteries,” seeking to reconcile herself to death. Though she does not get an answer to the injustice of death, in the process of looking deeply into the mystery, she communicates the harsh reality of old age and death and offers a rewarding vision of human experience. The portrait of her mother’s final years presents a picture of life’s spirit that will last beyond the
moment. Even in the harsh realities of ageing and in the face of death, Levertov confirms some sense of design:

Acknowledging that life is change, sometimes wondrous, sometimes hurtful, the poet seems to confirm in her act of remembering and formal artistic creation that a life that was fully lived can still be a living presence to the uncertain seekers who survive. The woman who “remembered her griefs. / [. . .] remembered her happinesses. / [. . .] / unfolding the design of her identity” (“Death Psalm” 39), leaves a glimpse of that design which passes into readers’ lives. (Marten 157)

Elsewhere in Life in the Forest Levertov examines the physical, emotional, and intellectual threads of which a life is woven. Remembering moments spent with a friend on the West Heath (“Notes,” LF 34), she recognizes that the past never vanishes into the present, but rather continues to give it shape and definition, both changing and changed by current needs. All the past experiences add to the meaning of the adult poet’s life now. Consistently, in all her books of poems Levertov has proven herself a poet of changes who recognized that the poet’s task is “to clarify [. . .] not answers but the existence and nature of questions” (The Poet in the World 45).

As we progress through the collections dealt with in this transitional phase of Levertov’s career as a poet, we see a reflection in her work, of her struggle and growth through self-doubt and self-alienation, desolation and despair – through a veritable dark night of the soul – till she is at the
threshold of belief. As Levertov says in an interview in February 1986 for *Sojourners*, she gradually finds herself strongly possessing “that sense of so much being “in bud” – so many things being in the beginning of growth, the first shoots of some different consciousness, of moral evolution, despite the fact that we go on more and more effectively doing the awful things that human beings do” (*Conversations* 151). And so we find that the poetry corresponding to the last part of her period of transition shows Levertov at the beginning of growth, with a mystical belief in a God within herself.

The spirit of coherence in the midst of change that emerges in *Life in the Forest* bursts forth in Levertov’s works of the 1980s and the 1990s – *Candles in Babylon, Oblique Prayers, Breathing the Water, Evening Train, Sands of the Well* and *This Great Unknowing*. In these, as though in a logical extension of her exploration of the mystery of experience, Levertov is seen moving towards a position of Christian belief. In an interview, Levertov has described herself as writing “poetry that articulates engaged emotion and belief” (qtd. in Marten 147). All the poems of these volumes do not make the subject of belief central. But even those poems on subjects such as family, politics and aesthetics often reveal a perception of forces beyond the individual that are part of the shape of experience. We see how slowly and steadily, her works evolve toward a vision of the mysteries of human experience that confirms religious conviction. Levertov believed that it is by the exercise of the imagination that “one moves toward faith,” for “the imagination [...] is the perceptive organ through which it is possible [...] to
experience God” (NSE 246). As Marten observes, “The intensity and breadth of the conviction that there are forces larger than man which the poet can experience through the imagination reveals a new spirituality in her treatment of self in relation to other, private perception in relation to public experience (147). In her poetry of the 1980s and 90s, Levertov develops her vision of the mysteries of human experience into a statement of religious conviction and faith. As central poems of each volume suggest, the poet, having looked deeply to see both inner and outer realities, arrives at a kind of spiritual reckoning. As she explains in an article in *Religion and Intellectual Life*:

[. . .] all in the creative act, experience mystery. The concept of “inspiration” presupposes a power which enters the individual and is not a personal attribute; and it is linked to a view of the artist’s life as one of obedience to a vocation. David Jones wrote in one of his essays of the artist’s impulse to gratuitously set up altars to the unknown god; and I alluded to the passage from what was then an agnostic standpoint. Later that unknown began to be defined for me as God and further, as God revealed in the Incarnation. (NSE 241)

In her political poems in these collections we notice that a more hopeful bridge replaces the emblematic gulf between simultaneous good and evil dominating her earlier political poetry. The theme of schism, of the human alienation from self and nature that underlies the section “Age of
Terror” in *Candles in Babylon* (71) actually offers hope. The long poem “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus” (CB 108) offers a clear view of the force of Levertov’s new beliefs. The figure of the Apostle Thomas, the doubting Thomas of the Gospel according to John, is an ideal choice to reveal the nature of Levertov’s faith. In her 1990 essay “Work that Enfaiths” Levertov states that as she became more and more occupied with “questions of belief,” she began to embark on what she calls “do-it-yourself theology” in an attempt to clarify her mind. This took place sometimes in poems, and she cites “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus” as one such instance. This poem which she had thought of as “an agnostic Mass” (NSE 250), says that individuals “live in terror / of what [they] know,” but they live in greater terror “of what [they] do not know [. . .].” However, the opening “Kyrie” section declares that “our hope lies” precisely “in the unknown, / in our unknowing.” From the prayer that the “deep, remote unknown, / [. . .] / Have mercy upon us” (CB 108), Levertov moves to the second section “Gloria” where she bids her reader to “Praise / [. . .] the unknown” which:

[. . .] gives us

still,

in the shadows of death,

our daily life,

and the dream still

of goodwill, of peace on earth. (CB 109)
In the “Credo” section Levertov clarifies her faith and its relationship to the example of the Apostle Thomas:

[. . .] I believe and
interrupt my belief with
doubt. I doubt and
interrupt my doubt with belief. Be,
beloved, threatened world. (CB 110)

In the “Sanctus,” Levertov praises the God-given human power of imagination to comprehend harmonies even while admitting anxiety and doubt:

all that Imagination
has wrought, has rendered,
striving, in throes of epiphany –

naming, forming, - to give
to the Vast Loneliness
a hearth, a locus – (CB 111)

In the “Benedictus” Levertov is humbled before the mystery of transubstantiation: “The word / chose to become / flesh. In the blur of flesh / we bow, baffled” (CB 113). And faced with the frailty of “a shivering God,” she places faith in mankind in the “Agnus Dei”, offering “something human” to “shield” this “defenseless” God (CB 115). She began composing this poem as an aesthetic exercise, as an “experiment in structure,” reasoning that if so many musical composers had mined the structure of the mass for
their art, she could do so in a poem. Several months into the process, when she had arrived at the Agnus Dei, as she says in her 1990 essay “Work That Enfaiths,” she discovered herself “to be in a different relationship to the material and to the liturgical form [. . .]. The experience of writing the poem – that long swim through waters of unknown depth – had been also a conversion process” (NSE 250). Throughout Candles in Babylon, Levertov affirms struggle, hope and a capacity for imaginative vision, which enable us to reach toward the immortal. And in the last poem “The Many Mansions”, she confirms for her readers that there are places for all manner and degrees of belief in God’s “house” (CB 116). In these three collections, we see that Levertov has come to a position of Christian belief. However, the poems in these collections show that she is still ridden with doubts, and God is referred to mostly as a presence or force that unites all experience. As with Whitman and other American mystics, her discovery of God here seems to be a discovery of God in herself, and an attempt to understand how that self is a natural part of the world.

Though she is able to conclude Candles in Babylon on an optimistic note, she carries her struggle against despair into Oblique Prayers. Levertov comes to a recognition of a “happiness” that is “provisional”:

I know this happiness

is provisional:

the looming presences –

great suffering, great fear –
but ineluctable this shimmering
of wind in the blue leaves:
this flood of stillness
widening the lake of sky:
this need to dance,
this need to kneel:
this mystery: (OP 86)

*Oblique Prayers* is divided into four sections, each with a thematic arrangement of poems that endeavour to define the darkness and embrace faith. The volume opens with the mystery of “Decipherings” of daily experience wherein we find poems of personal reflection, and progresses to the religious vision of the final section “Of God and of the Gods.” The poem “Decipherings” gives direction to the rest of the volume. In it the poet asserts her need for a stable moral centre. The second section “Prisoners” treats historical and political themes and offers insight into the ways in which individuals are prisoners of history. Section three contains translations of fourteen poems by the French poet Jean Joubert that offer revelations of spiritual conviction and suggest a harmony of all created things. Levertov, as we have already seen, had an underlying belief in a great design and a potential harmony, and the translations from Joubert “offer a nearly perfect vehicle for her to confirm the conviction of design,
suggesting that it is not simply her own quaint obsession” (Marten 169). However, Joubert’s spirituality is pantheistic while Levertov’s, even as she is sympathetic to his revelation of man’s place in nature’s design, reveals a faith that is more directly Christian.

*Oblique Prayers* in its final section explores the nature of God with spiritual speculations and meditative lyrics, and holds some of Levertov’s most delicate seeing and some subtle moments of religious ecstasy as in the poem “Of Rivers”:

Rivers remember

[. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .]

a touch

shuddering them forth,

a voice

intoning them into

their ebbing and flood:

[. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .]

That remembrance
gives them their way
to know, in unknowing flowing,

the God of the gods, whom the gods

themselves have not imagined. (*OP* 71)

In this collection the poet addresses a different darkness as she says in the title poem “Oblique Prayers” – “Not the profound *dark / night of the soul /
[...] but gray, / a place / without clear outlines” (OP 82). The book ends in stillness and peace, with Levertov’s discovery that “A gratitude / had begun to sing in me” (OP 85). In the last poem “Passage,” the pilgrim-poet celebrates the power of the Spirit that has inspired her journey all along the way. She acknowledges the creative strength of the Spirit – “breath, ruach, light that is witness and by which we witness.” We are led to understand that “the spirit that walked upon the face of the waters” at the time of creation is present still, moving over the meadow of long grass, for, even now, “green shines to silver where the spirit passes,” inviting us to bow and sing with the “grasses” that “cry hosanna” (OP 87).

In an interview with Joan F. Hallisey in 1986, Levertov says that her “faith is at best fragile” and that “there is a deep hope implied in the words, “With God all things are possible”” (Conversations 151). Coming a year after this confession, Breathing the Water reveals Levertov as a religious poet. This book celebrates man’s creative relationship to nature, and affirms a connection between the physical and the spiritual. The work clearly reveals the impact of Rilke who, as already mentioned, pursued art as an almost religious activity. She presents variations on poems and themes by Rilke, conversations with medieval visionaries like Caedmon and Lady Julian of Norwich, and observations on religious painting, architecture and writing, thereby suggesting that ordinary lives can be transformed by divine revelation.
Levertov shares Rilke’s conviction that true piety contains “something of invention” and that “our relationship to God presupposes a certain ‘creativity,’ and certain ‘inventive genius’” (qtd. in Marten 178). She believes that the poet’s visionary task is to perceive and communicate divine mystery in the natural world. In “Variation on a Theme by Rilke,” the old monk comments on depictions of Christ by various artists:

not one is a fancy, a willed fiction,

each of them shows us exactly

the manifold countenance

of the Holy One, Blessed be He. (BW71)

In the same poem Levertov writes, “From the divine twilight, neither dark nor day, / blossoms the morning.” And she reveals her recognition that man’s creativity is dependent upon God’s:

[. . .]. Thus the Infinite

plays, and in grace

gives us clues to His mystery. (BW71)

The poet also urges the reader, in yet another reflection, to remain open to spiritual experience, and to see with her a spiritual plan, and realize that in our very restlessness “God’s flight circles us” (BW 83).

“The Servant Girl at Emmaus” is a poem inspired by a painting by Velasquez, which focuses on a black servant girl looking at Christ taking a meal and recognizing him. Levertov shares through the poem her certainty that the spiritual is revealed in the physical:
Those who had brought this stranger home to their table
don’t recognize yet with whom they sit.

But she in the kitchen, [. . .]

swings around and sees

the light around him

and is sure. (BW 66)

In “Caedmon” Levertov retells Bede’s history of how the illiterate
Christian poet Caedmon received the gift of song. Suggesting that spirit,
word, music, and dance are inevitably linked, Levertov’s Caedmon reveals
man in active, creative harmony with himself and with forces beyond
himself. Caedmon describes the event by saying how

the sudden angel affrighted me – [. . .]

[. . .] and nothing was burning,

nothing but I, as that hand of fire
touched my lips and scorched my tongue

and pulled my voice

into the ring of the dance. (BW 65)

Though Levertov would never call herself a mystic, she was extremely
interested in “mystical experience,” specifically Christian mystical
experience as she admits in an interview with Terrell Crouch in 1986. She
has written a whole bunch of poems about Julian of Norwich (Conversations
159). In “The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich, 1342-1416” and “On a
Theme from Julian’s Chapter XX” she explores the relationship between the
human and the divine and contemplates the nature of knowledge. She suggests that the knowledge that the medieval woman gains through faith and imagination may be truer than the truth gained by the modern woman through science and reason. Julian sees a “little thing” no smaller than a hazelnut and understands the mystery of “all that is made” (BW 75). Living amidst the skepticism of the twentieth century, Levertov asserts that Julian’s desire for the “wounds” of “compassion,” “contrition” and “longing with my will for God,” is “not, five centuries early, neurosis” (BW 76). It is rather her urge to perceive God’s presence in the world and to recognize his kinship with man. Julian knew suffering and confusion:

She lived in dark times, as we do:

war, and Black Death, hunger, strife,
torture, massacre. She knew
all of this, she felt it (BW 81)

However, she responded with joy, and Levertov, torn by the pain and terrors of her age takes courage:

[. . .] Julian, Julian –
I turn to you:

you clung to joy through tears and sweat
rolled down your face [. . .]

[. . .] your certainty
of finite mercy, witnessed
with your own eyes, with outward sight
in your small room with inward sight
in your untrammeled spirit –
knowledge we long to share:

*Love was his meaning.* (BW 82)

Throughout *Breathing the Water*, Levertov attempts to reveal the
interrelationship of physical and spiritual life, and the power of the poet’s
imagination to transform literary and natural objects. Though she has come
to a position of Christian belief, her poems still reveal her search for a deeper
faith and a clearer vision; for Simeon’s certitude of knowing new life as he
holds the infant Jesus in his arms, for the “depth / of faith he drew on, /
turning illumined / towards deep night” (BW 70).

*A Door in the Hive*, her next collection, contains much artistic
continuity and also reveals the new directions her work has taken. It
attempts further explorations into the nature of knowledge, humanity, and
into the mysteries of faith. The influence of Rilke continues as she writes
many more variations on his themes that explore the implications of faith. So
too, pieces like “El Salvador: Requiem and Invocation” and “Land of Death-
Squads” show her continuing concern with political disorders and the
horrors of the world. Her belief that we are all members, one of another is
seen afresh in “All”: “The body being savaged / is alive. It is our own” (DH
45). However, not many people feel the same way. “It is not / our heart, we
think [. . .]. / It is the world’s, poor world, but I, / am other” (DH 46).
Levertov says that in the midst of the horrifying visions of war, “We utter
the words / we are one / but their truth / is not real to us” (DH 47). She
invites her readers to unite and pray “for the dead,” “for faith,” and “for
hope” (*DH* 39). Her quest for the truth is still on, but with a difference. She begins to look beyond nature and to the Spirit to waken man’s understanding:

Lift us, Spirit, impel
our rising
into that knowledge.
Make truth real to us,
flame on our lips. (*DH* 47)

*A Door in the Hive* bears testimony to Levertov’s deepening faith as she writes poems centered on the person and teachings of Christ. The poem “Nativity: An Altarpiece” where Levertov paints the picture of “the living Child Himself” shedding “the glow of light that illumines the byre” (*DH* 91), shows her acceptance as truth that the infant Jesus is God. A celebration of mystery has been a favourite theme with Levertov and poems like “On the Mystery of the Incarnation,” “Annunciation,” and “Ikon: The Harrowing of Hell” find her dwelling on the sacred mysteries surrounding the life of Christ and offering the reader spiritual insights as well.

If in her earlier collections of the 1980s Levertov perceives a divine presence or a sense of holiness made manifest, in *A Door in the Hive* she comes to recognize this presence as the person of Christ who is Spirit, who is God. “On the Mystery of the Incarnation” speaks of the word made flesh in Christ:

It’s when we face for a moment
the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know
that taint on ourselves, that awe

cracks the mind’s shell and enters the heart:

[. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .]

[. . .] to this creature vainly sure

it and no other is god-like, God

(out of compassion for our ugly failure to evolve) entrusts,

as guest, as brother,

the Word. (DH 50)

Many poems in this collection like “Flickering Mind” and St. Thomas Didymus” are autobiographical and reveal a phase in Levertov’s spiritual life where she vacillates between belief and unbelief. “Flickering Mind” says that “belief was a joy” for her at first but now she eludes God’s presence: “Not you, / it is I am absent.” When she describes God as “the unchanging presence, in whom all / moves and changes,” she is rephrasing Acts 17:28, “for in Him we live and move and exist.” She asks the Lord:

How can I focus my flickering, perceive

at the fountain’s heart

the sapphire I know is there? (DH 64)

What sustains her and clears the way for new commitments of belief is her faith as a poet in the “truth of imagination” as Keats calls it. For in “following the road of imagination,” she has come to see “certain analogies, and also some interaction, between the journey of art and the journey of faith” (NSE 248-249). In the poem “St. Thomas Didymus” she continues her exploration of faith and doubt. The reference here is to Mark 9:16-29 where
Jesus heals a boy possessed with a spirit that makes him mute and throws him into convulsions. When the boy’s father approaches Jesus for help, Jesus says, “All things are possible to him who believes.” Immediately the father cries out, “I do believe: help my unbelief.” In the poem Levertov recognizes in the boy’s father her “twin,” for, she says, his cry, “Lord, I believe, help thou / mine unbelief” is what my heart / sighed with each beat, my breath silently / cried in and out [. . .]” (DH 101). Later when she hears of Golgotha and of Christ’s resurrection, her cry is still the same. She needs, like Thomas Didymus, “the touch / of blood” to tell her the truth. As Levertov writes in “Work that En faiths,“

“Even his meeting with the risen Christ does not suffice to give him certitude as long as it is visual alone; it is the concreteness of touch, of flesh and blood, which frees him at last. He is moved from tenuous belief to an illuminated conviction in which he can rest, like Lady Julian, from the nagging need for explanation.” (NSE 254)

Similarly, when Levertov’s hand “entered the unhealed wound,” she feels light streaming into her and is led beyond her nagging doubts to the borderlands, where such questions do not apply:

I witnessed

all things quicken to color, to

form,

my question
not answered but given
its part
in a vast unfolding design lit
by a risen sun. (DH 103)

This light of faith shines through in *Evening Train* written even as she enters the evening of her life and the forty-sixth year of her career as a poet endeavouring to bring hope and praise. Here she attempts further self-definition. At the beginning of the collection she recognizes that she must “still / grow in the dark like a root / not ready, not ready at all” (*ET* 41). Here again, as in all her previous collections, we have poems on most of her time-tested themes. The largest of the eight sections of poems in this collection is entitled “Witnessing from Afar.” In it, Levertov explores a variety of social violations and abuses, from the first poem’s critique of environmental degradation to the final poem’s revisiting of the Babel myth. Looming over all the social ills mentioned in this section is the 1991 Gulf War whose further “refining” of “the machines of destruction”, of the so-called “art of war” (*ET* 79), leads to an eruption of apocalyptic language fully equivalent to anything written during the time of the Vietnam War: “the world’s raw gash / reopened, the whole world / a valley of streaming blood” (*ET* 80). “The Certainty” of war and death remains and in the poem “In California during the Gulf War” she comments: “And when it was claimed / that war had ended, it had not ended” (*ET* 84). She also writes on nature and environmental issues as in “Tragic Error” where she laments the looting and pillaging of the earth. Even such poems contain echoes from the
Bible: “The earth is the Lord’s, we garbled, / and the fullness thereof [ . . . ] (ET 69).

Levertov reveals her familiarity with the teachings of Christ in the New Testament in poems like “What the Figtree Said”, where “Christ the Poet / who spoke in images” uses the barren fig tree as a metaphor for his friends who failed “to bring forth / what is within them” (ET 111). Offering this original insight, Levertov speaks of the need to bring forth human fruits of compassion and comprehension.

Levertov presents an unusual picture of a God who suffers for the sins of man, and yet pursues man out of his great love. “Contraband” suggests that although a wall has risen between men and God because they tasted of the tree of life and reason, God,

    through the slit where the barrier doesn’t

    quite touch the ground, manages still

    to squeeze in – as filtered light,

    splinters of fire, a strain of music [ . . . ] (ET 112)

To the impressive series of Christ poems that precede it, Evening Train makes several important contributions. “Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis” begins with a reflection on Christ’s physical appearance, and moves quickly to its primary concern: the ultimate “burden of [Christ’s] humanness”. Levertov goes beyond trying to plumb the depths of Christ’s suffering, stressing His very willingness to suffer. She says that even the greatest painters fail to show Christ’s “face, in extremis,” tasting “the humiliation of dread,”
“wanting to let the whole thing go,” “longing / to simply cease, to not be.”

How long and how deeply she has pondered over the passion of Christ is revealed in her declaration that “Incarnation’s heaviest weight” was “this sickened desire to renege,” for,

Sublime acceptance, to be absolute, had to have welled up from those depths where purpose drifted for mortal moments. (ET 114)

Thus Christ serves as a model. By willingly shouldering the pain of the world, He urges us to move beyond self-destructive behaviour, and teaches us the necessity of facing up to the obligations that define our life and age and not “to renege, / to step back” from our responsibilities.

“Ascension” is another poem where Levertov’s imagination throws light on the mystery of Incarnation and on the Ascension of Jesus into Heaven. In an unusual reflection, she wonders if the Ascension could not have been as arduous as Christ’s return from Sheol at His resurrection. She highlights Christ’s mixed emotions at his Ascension:

Expulsion,

liberation,

last

Self-joined task

of Incarnation

He again

Fathering Himself.
Seed – case
splitting,
He again
Mothering His birth:
torture and bliss. (ET 115-116)

Many of the poems in *Evening Train* look out toward Mount Rainier, part of the landscape of her new Seattle home in the Northwest. Levertov finds, in the veilings and unveilings of Rainier, an emblem of the presence of God and of the need for human constancy of attention. “Morning Mist” begins with the mountain's invisibility. Though “we equate / God with these absences,” “God // is imaged / as well or better / in the white stillness // resting everywhere” (ET 5). Thus the encounter with God takes place in stillness or silence, which is to be found “everywhere.” She says of the mountain that “its vanishings / are needful, as silence is to music” (ET 94). She observes that whether the mountain is hidden in “veils / of cloud” or whether she herself is hidden in “veils of inattention,” the mountain and the poet remain in a relationship of “witnessing presence” (ET 97).

The volume’s final word is reserved for a section entitled “The Tide” – a grouping that brings together the two imaginative acts through which Levertov’s world has sought to sustain itself: the writing of poetry and Christian faith. Here we find an intense, imaginative appropriation of Christian scripture in an attempt to establish some kind of balance to humankind’s suicidal destructiveness. In the title poem, the penultimate
poem of this collection, Levertov, reflecting upon her faith, is constantly brought back to her doubt: “In this emptiness / there seems no Presence” (ET 117). She conjures up “a myriad images / of faith,” like faith when God’s presence is not felt in the emptiness, or faith when God wants “something quite different” for man or may be even “nothing at all” (ET 117). Levertov reveals the depth and conviction of her faith when she arrives at a true understanding of what it means to have faith, what it means to truly believe. The poem is an imaginative reworking of a Biblical passage: James 2: 14-16. The Book of James, with its emphasis on “good works,” is best understood through the analogy of motion. When a person becomes a Christian, new life begins, and inevitably that life must express itself through “spiritual motion” or good deeds. In James’s words, “faith without deeds is dead” (2:26). The poem under consideration reveals that Levertov has come to understand that genuine faith in Christ should always result in actions that demonstrate that faith. Having all the correct beliefs about God will hardly suffice: even demons believe in God. Therefore, James says: “Do not merely listen to the word [. . .]. Do what it says” (1:22). Levertov goes on to write, in lines that echo Matthew Arnold’s “sea of faith” image:

Faith’s a tide, it seems, ebbs and flows responsive
to action and inaction.

Remain in stasis, blown sand
stings your face, anemones

shrivel in rock pools no wave renews. (ET 118)
If she can transcend “stasis” and continually renew her faith, she will be able
to hold absence in a cup:

Clean the littered beach, clear the lines of a forming poem,
the waters flood inward.
Dull stones again fulfill
their glowing destinies, and emptiness
is a cup, and holds
the ocean. (ET 118)

Only in a vision of utter emptiness can the presence of God be perceived.
She is in a state of not knowing, of knowing that she does not know. And in
embracing the paradox of faith, Levertov gains a spiritual strength.

The last poem of Evening Train finds Levertov “Suspended” in the
void even as her hand slips on the rich silk of God’s garment. She says that
the “everlasting arms” that her sister Olga loved to remember “must have
upheld my leaden weight” for “I have not plummeted” (ET 119). The book
closes thus, with this picture of the poet waiting in darkness for the light,
feeling “nothing” yet holding on by a literal thread to her faith.

There transpired some events of great significance for Levertov the
poet in the period between the writing of her 1990 essay “Work that
Enfaiths” and the writing of Sands of the Well (1996), her last collection before
her death. She moved to Seattle, was baptized a Catholic, and did the
Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. Thus we find that this book, the poet’s first
exclusively Northwest collection, has a defining spiritual perspective, and
reveals a new sensibility generated perhaps by her change in locale. In an interview Lever
tov told Ed Block, that when she did the Spiritual Exercises,

[. . .] what really struck me was how much of what St. Ignatius
recommended resembles what a poet does anyway. As a religious exercise, he recommends imagining oneself a witness
of Gospel events and noting every physical detail that one can
conceive. And in writing poetry, one must do the same thing –
one must observe (or re-observe, re-collect) - every concrete
detail of your subject, whether or not you ultimately include all
of them in the poem. (7)

Consequently, coming at the end of a life of close attention, Sands of
the Well shows Levertov at the height of her powers, and graced with new
depths of awe. In eight sections – “Crow Spring,” “Sojourns in the Parallel
World,” “It Should Be Visible,” “Anamnesis,” “Representations,” “Raga,”
“A South Wind,” and “Close to a Lake” – the book represents her familiar
interests: nature, the arts, autobiographical memories, political protest,
Christian myth and belief. In a poem entitled “For Those Whom the Gods
Love Less,” in this collection Levertov writes:

When you discover
your new work travels the ground you had traversed
decades ago, you wonder, panicked,
‘Have I outlived my vocation? Said already
all that was mine to say?’ (SW 96)
She goes on to propose a remedy – to remember the great ones like Cezanne and James, and “the way / radiant epiphanies recur, recur / [. . .]. And then, look, / some inflection of light, some wing of shadow / is other, unvoiced. You can, you must / proceed” (SW 96). And so we find that as Levertov’s new work travels the ground she had traversed in the past, ‘radiant epiphanies recur’, and she does proceed.

We note particularly that there are only four poems of social critique, and what is more, the very tone of her protest seems to have changed. In “Some Affinities of Content” (1991), Levertov remarks on her poetry of social engagement thus: “But this didactic role [. . .] was undertaken as a further obligation of social conscience, not from personal choice; for my interest has always been elsewhere” (NSE 4). In Sands of the Well, she seems to be for once, following her interest rather than her obligation, attested further by her turn to Christianity, to a religiosity foreshadowed in Oblique Prayers. She goes on to explain after the admission cited above, that of late she has “more and more [. . .] sought [. . .] a poetry that, while it does not attempt to ignore or deny the ocean of crisis in which we swim, is itself “on pilgrimage,” as it were, in search of significance underneath and beyond the succession of temporal events.” Sands of the Well suggests that her newfound faith is part of the reason the “ocean of crisis” and the darker elements of the poet’s consciousness do not exert more sway. She retains an overall calm, a “leisure of mind” (ET 23), “to live in what happens, not in the telling,” recognizing that the task before her is just “to be” (ET 61). Levertov even
devotes an entire section to what she calls “Sojourns in the Parallel World,” a world “[w]e call [. . .] ‘Nature,’” a world “devoid / of our preoccupations, free / from apprehension” (SW 49). Thus a celebration of “being” runs throughout this volume.

In this collection we also see how her poetic talent continues to shape her life in line with what she says in a speech to a group of students in 1979 published in her 1981 prose collection, Light up the Cave:

I think the people that go on writing all their lives are those for whom that process is itself utterly fascinating. For the poet, not having written a poem, but the experience of writing it, is what matters. And somehow, if your gift goes on growing and making its demand on you, you will try to find the ways of living that will be most suitable for you as individuals to go on doing your work in poetry – you will find your talent giving shape to your lives. (79)

The last section of Sands in the Well, which deals mainly with matters of faith, shows how Levertov’s talent gives shape to her life. Her long study of the nature of spiritual insight here finds an ever more active professed engagement. ‘In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being’ the first poem of this section – “Close to a Lake” – calls to mind an earlier poem, ‘The Avowal,’ where she expresses her desire “[. . .] to attain / freefall, and float / into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace, / knowing no effort earns / that all-surrounding grace” (OP 76). Here at the height of her poetic career and even
as she attains great heights of spiritual understanding, she speaks in all humility of her inability to attain freefall, yet with no hint of doubt in the all-encompassing “God / the air enveloping the whole / globe of being”:

[. . .] only the saints
take flight. We cower
in cliff-crevice or edge out gingerly
on branches close to the nest. The wind
marks the passage of holy ones riding
that ocean of air. Slowly their wake
reaches us, rocks us.

But storm or still,
Numb or poised in attention,
We inhale, exhale, inhale,
encompassed, encompassed. (SW107)

It is interesting to note that the title of this poem is taken from Acts 17:28, where the Apostle Paul, on seeing an ‘Altar to the Unknown God’ speaks to a gathering of philosophers and thinkers in the sophisticated university city of Athens, and makes known to them this unknown God. Preaching the good news of Jesus and the resurrection, Paul speaks of God the Creator who wants that men should seek him and reach out for him and find him though he is not far from each one of us. “For in him we live and move and have our being.” This poem then could be seen as Levertov’s witness to the once unknown God of her days of agnosticism, who was
unveiled to her through the exercise of her imagination and of her poetic faculties.

In “The Beginning of Wisdom” we have an explication of Proverbs 9:10 – “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding”, with reference to Levertov’s life and spirituality. In this poem as in many others we find mirrored her dignity, integrity and grace, and most of all, an indomitable and humble spirit. For the poet, with knowledge of God there comes understanding and the realization that it is he who has brought her so far, and in all humility she acknowledges:

I am so small, a speck of dust
moving across the huge world.
[
I know so little. (SW 109)
]

As she advances in her spiritual journey we see her undergoing a change in perspective, as illustrated by a comparison of two poems, the last poem of Evening Train, and one from the next collection Sands of the Well. In “Suspended” she says, “I had grasped God’s garment in the void / but my hand slipped / on the rich silk of it.” (ET 24) and in her address to God in the poem “The Beginning of Wisdom” in she writes, “You hold / onto my smallness. / How do you grasp it, / how does it not / slip away? ” (emphasis added), (SW 109). “Psalm Fragments” speaks of “clinging to a God / for whom one does / nothing,” and makes the change all the more
clear: “I do nothing, I give You / nothing. Yet You hold me // minute by minute / from falling” (SW118).

In “Some Affinities of Content” (1991), Denise Levertov speaks of a “deep spiritual longing” in writers and readers which makes irrelevant the kind of literary criticism “which treats works of art as if they were diagrams or merely means provided for the exercise of analysis, rather than what they are: testimonies of lived life, which is what writers have a vocation to give, and readers [. . .] have a need to receive” (NSE 21).

The poem, “Conversion of Brother Lawrence” (SW 111-13) is a powerful testimony of the lived life, expressed and mediated through her poetic craft, and allows Levertov to project herself into the mystic's life, and, in the making of the poem, to discern what she lacks. The poem holds before us the possibility of a poet's way which is also the saint's way, and demonstrates how relinquishment can become transformation. Brother Lawrence, like Caedmon, whose story Levertov tells in Breathing the Water, is an awkward, medieval menial, who through divine grace, experiences an awakening. This gentle monk with a joyful spirit discovers and follows a pure and uncomplicated way to walk continually in the presence of God. His conversion though, is not occasioned by a fiery visitation as in the Caedmon story, but by a “more-than-green voice” speaking from a “leafless tree” (SW111).

Levertov's imaginative projection into Brother Lawrence's life takes the form of an Ignatian colloquy through which she frames questions and
arrives at discoveries. What she needs from this colloquy is a way through her darkness, an encouragement to think of work in new ways, reasons to trust Brother Lawrence's joy. As she places him, God did not relieve Brother Lawrence of his hardships, but rather accompanied him on a life-journey which was like the long hard roads of war. Even while his “soul felt darkened, heavy and worthless,” her imagined Brother Lawrence discovered that God never abandoned him, and he entered into “the unending ‘silent secret conversation’, / the life of steadfast attention” (SW 112).

As the two activities, prayer and work, become one in his life, Brother Lawrence seems like the artist; but Levertov argues: “Your secret was not the craftsman's delight in process, / which doesn't distinguish work from pleasure – ” (SW 112). His daily work itself (which was largely scut-work in the kitchen) was not the way into the presence of God, but was merely what he did while in His presence. Where the Presence shone, “there life was, and abundantly; it touched / your dullest task, and the task was easy.” For Brother Lawrence, the task at hand is not artifact-making but a different kind of attention:

Joyful, absorbed,
you ‘practiced the presence of God’ as a musician
practices hour after hour his art:
‘A stone before the carver,’
you ‘entered into yourself.’ (SW 113)
As we come to the volume’s title poem, where she describes the
descent of “golden particles” of sand in a well till finally the “water’s /
absolute transparence / is complete,” we see that the utter clarity of inner
transparency is what awakens the poet’s wonder:

Is this
the place where
you are brought in meditation?

Transparency
seen for itself
as if its quality
were not, after all,
to enable
perception not of itself? (SW124)

“Surely it is this culminating recognition of the sacred significance of
transparency itself, of ‘being’ prior to and beyond all individual presences,
all actions, all responsibilities, that marks Sands of the Well as an important
development in Levertov’s spiritual quest,” as Edward Zlotkowski so
pertinently remarks (9).

In Sands of the Well, as the review on its jacket says, “Levertov allows
the reader to sense the complexity under her perfect clarity of surface, and
her music and precision bear us along to a new awareness of the ‘Primary
Wonder’”: 
And then

once more the quiet mystery

is present to me, the throng’s clamor

recedes: the mystery

that there is anything, anything at all,

let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,

rather than void: and that O Lord,

Creator, Hallowed One, You still,

Hour by hour sustain it. (SW 129)

At her death in 1997, Levertov left a notebook containing forty unfinished poems. A note on the text by Paul A. Lacey explains that these poems, published under the title This Great Unknowing, are placed as they appeared in her notebook, roughly chronologically. If Levertov had lived to see them published, she would have followed her usual practice of organizing them into thematic groups. So, the collection does not benefit from that final poetic touch, although several clear themes emerge in these luminous poems. The spiritual focus that runs throughout Sands of the Well continues with greater depth in this posthumous collection, with her characteristic restlessness giving way to a more quiet, satisfied, self-contained voice and with the achievement of a beautiful balance of the tremendous joy and celebration associated with her first American poetry and the sadness and even anger associated with her politically engaged poetry.
Though they represent her last writing, there is nothing elegiac about these poems. Instead, they are direct, relaxed, immediate, showing the willingness to experiment and the playfulness of a writer completely at ease with her craft. They range from light observations of small things, like her own large ears in the poem “Elephant Ears” to serious reflections on global matters such as the rate of extinction of animal species in “A Hundred a Day” and meditations on the nature of God in “Moments of Joy.” Moving through all of them is Levertov’s earthly romanticism, linking animal and mineral, human and natural, with metaphors built on a vision of connections. In “A Clearing” Levertov defines a poem in a way that sums up her method neatly: “inspiration; starting with the given; / unexpected harmonies; revelations” (GU 55). All of these poems are grounded in exact observation, and move through imaginative metaphors to moments of insight and even revelation.

Connecting elements of nature with features of human culture produces some of Levertov’s most original metaphors. In the first poem of the collection, “From Below,” she compares walking among giant redwoods to a child under the table listening to the conversation of the adults above. “The minds of people, the minds of trees / equally remote” (GU 3), Levertov reflects, aptly giving life to the cliché of the redwood as forest elder. In another poem, “Celebration,” she describes a “young virtuoso of a day” (GU 5), and in one of several poems of Mount Rainier, she describes the mountain surrounded by “curly cherub clouds,” as “a frowning / humorless
old poet, / sullen among the putti” (GU 34). For Levertov, the gap between nature and human culture is always navigable by the imagination.

Levertov, as has already been mentioned, has achieved a double reputation, difficult to maintain on the post-Christian times of the western world, as a respected mainstream poet and as a religious poet as well. Few contemporary poets would be able to use words like ‘holiness’ and ‘prayer’ without deconstructing or recontextualizing them, but Levertov does. She is frankly and openly religious, but without dogmatism or sentimentality, making her religious verse interesting and engaging even for the most secular of readers. The title of the book This Great Unknowing is from the poem “Translucence,” in which Levertov defines saintliness as a kind of “half-opaque whiteness” of souls unaware of their holiness, “always trying / to share our joy as if it were cake or water, / something ordinary, not rare at all” (GU 48). In her best poems, religious insight appears from within the details of physical images.

A series of poems titled “Feet” is one of the best in the collection; filled with humour, close observations of the human world, and original metaphors. In the “Feet” poems, Levertov is “writing the body,” as feminists have urged women to do, beginning with images of real feet, their aches and pains, grit and grime, and, moving outward, embracing the story of Anderson’s ‘Little Mermaid,’ the feet of a homeless man wrapped in plastic, ending with the Maundy Thursday custom of foot washing. With her gift for synthesis, Levertov melds all these images into a satisfying and coherent
whole and shows how the physical experience leads to spiritual understanding.

Levertov’s understanding of the role of the poet, of the function of poetry in today’s world seems grounded in two statements that she includes in her 1968 lecture “Origins of a Poem” published in The Poet in the World: Ibsen’s statement, “The task of the poet is to make clear to himself and thereby to others the temporal and eternal questions” (44) and a line from a Toltec poem she had translated, “The true artist maintains dialogue with himself, with his heart” (45). We find therefore, that the poems and the career of Denise Levertov who was, in her own words “by nature, heritage, and as an artist, forever a stranger and pilgrim” (NSE 245), are an account of a person preparing for encounter with God, through her attention to the spoken word and her profound understanding of the poem as oral discourse, heart speaking to heart, I to Thou. As she writes in one of her last poems “Immersion,”

God’s abstention is only from human dialects. The holy voice utters its woe and glory in myriad musics, in signs and portents. Our own words are for us to speak, a way to ask and to answer.

(GU 53)