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ERRATA

p 20 line 11, read "he or she" for "they"

p 43 next to last line, read "reins" for "reigns"

p 91 line 6, read "her to encounter" for "her encounter"

p 235 line 2, read "of" for "or"

CHANGING THE CHEMISTRY OF THE SOUL:

**The Role of the Well
in Denise Levertov's Poetics of Listening**

A dissertation submitted
in fulfilment of the requirement
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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THIS WORK IS DEDICATED TO

my mother,

Heather Greder

and

my friend and teacher,

Dr John Leonard

A Gift

Just when you seem to yourself
nothing but a flimsy web
of questions, you are given
the questions of others to hold
in the emptiness of your hands,
songbird eggs that can still hatch
if you keep them warm,
butterflies opening and closing themselves
in your cupped palms, trusting you not to injure
their scintillant fur, their dust.
You are given the questions of others
as if they were answers
to all you ask. Yes, perhaps
this gift is your answer.

— *Denise Levertov*

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ABSTRACT

The image of the well in Denise Levertov's poetry is neglected by critics and it is not mentioned in Levertov's prose works containing explicit statements about her poetry and poetics. This thesis attempts to fill the gap in the criticism and to highlight the valuable role of the image of the well in indicating the development of Levertov's poetics throughout her writing life.

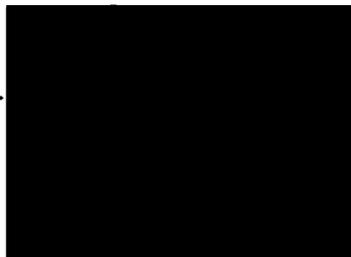
In particular, I focus on the transition from the well as symbol to the well as image. A study of this transition, which spans Levertov's career, is a valuable way to gain an understanding of the corresponding transitions in Levertov's relationship with the world. The poetry explores the issues of experience, transcendence, listening and relationship, and the connections between them. The structure of the well is a symbol that Levertov uses early on to come to terms with her perceptions of the outside world. Later, however, the well is not a symbol but an image that occurs in language in the form of an event rather than the form of an object. The poet thus explores her relationship with the world in poetry that is primarily an experience.

I believe that in Levertov's poetry there is a strong convergence between aesthetics and ethics. My discussion of this convergence is informed by the work of various contemporary thinkers including Kevin Hart, Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Heidegger, Karl Rahner, Simone Weil, Albert Schweitzer. Levertov's own statements, in her prose works, provide illuminating insights into her convictions about aesthetics and ethics. Criticism has attempted to divide her poetics into categories such as "feminist," "political" and "religious." However, she is the first to resist such a reduction of her work. Close attention to the language of the poetry, particularly the changing form of the well image, can lead to an understanding of the connections in Levertov's thinking between many diverse areas of inquiry. Levertov advocates for a relationship with the world that is characterised by a stance of listening. In the language of her poetry ethical matters are equally as important as aesthetic considerations.

CANDIDATE'S STATEMENT

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed ...



.. Date ..

2.11.01

7.11.01

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>DI</i>	<i>The Double Image</i> (London: Cresset, 1946)
<i>CEP</i>	<i>Collected Earlier Poems, 1940-1960</i> (1979)
<i>P</i>	<i>Poems, 1960-1967</i> (1983)
<i>RA</i>	<i>Relearning the Alphabet</i> (1970)
<i>TSA</i>	<i>To Stay Alive</i> (1971)
<i>F</i>	<i>Footprints</i> (1972)
<i>FD</i>	<i>The Freeing of the Dust</i> (1975)
<i>LF</i>	<i>Life in the Forest</i> (1978)
<i>CIB</i>	<i>Candles in Babylon</i> (1982)
<i>OP</i>	<i>Oblique Prayers</i> (1981)
<i>BW</i>	<i>Breathing the Water</i> (1987)
<i>DH</i>	<i>A Door in the Hive</i> (1984)
<i>ET</i>	<i>Evening Train</i> (1992)
<i>SW</i>	<i>Sands of the Well</i> (1996)
<i>PIW</i>	<i>The Poet in the World</i> (1973)
<i>LUC</i>	<i>Light Up the Cave</i> (1981)
<i>NSE</i>	<i>New and Selected Essays</i> (1992)

At the time *The Double Image* was published, Levertov used her father's Russian surname "Levertoff." In all other collections her name is spelled "Levertov." Each collection listed here, with the exception of *The Double Image*, was published in New York by New Directions. These abbreviations are used throughout the text of the thesis without further annotation.

INTRODUCTION

In Denise Levertov's poetry ethics and aesthetics are inseparable. Her thinking is embodied in her poetry, particularly in her use of imagery. There are many ways into a discussion of the connections between ethics and aesthetics in Levertov's poetry and poetics. I have chosen to examine the image of the well because it is a continuous and profound indicator of the transformations that occur in Levertov's thinking throughout her career. While this is also true of Levertov's imagery in general, the well is of particular interest to me because it is neglected in Levertov's essays on her own and others' poetry and poetics, and it is virtually absent from the criticism on Levertov. Virginia Kouidis comes closest to acknowledging the well as a significant image when she comments on its presence in a small handful of poems. She writes, "[t]he well symbolizes the poet's essential center, its waters connecting her to the mystery of origins and to the final surety of the sea."¹ She also observes that, for Levertov, "wells and quiet well-like depths are the breeding waters of the imagination."² While I disagree with some of the main points in Kouidis's article — such as the notion that the well is foremost a symbol, and that images function as

¹ Virginia M. Kouidis, "Denise Levertov: Her Illustrious Ancestry," *North Dakota Quarterly* 55.4 (1987) 112.

² Kouidis, "Denise Levertov," 113.

“allegory” — I appreciate her statements above and feel frustrated that she abandons the ideas as quickly as she introduces them.³ Harry Marten gestures, perhaps unconsciously, towards the significance of the well in Levertov’s poetry when he mentions the “deep well of the self” that he believes Levertov was exploring in her middle years.⁴ These references to the well constitute the current state of critical thinking regarding the well’s role in Levertov’s poetry and poetics. I attempt to fill this obvious gap in the criticism and, in doing so, I suggest that the well in Levertov’s poetry is a site of discovery for the poet and for the reader regarding what it means to speak of experience, transcendence, listening, and relationship. The well image is the site in which I discover the extent to which Levertov’s ethics and aesthetics converge.

In Levertov’s poetry, the well is a space of desire. In the early poetry, the well is a symbol that is located at the threshold of the speaker’s inner and outer experience. Desire, in these early poems, is almost akin to frustration at the seemingly unbridgeable gap between these inner and outer worlds, and plays an important part in the speaker’s imagining of “the unknown.” Later, this gap is less of a concern since relationship between the self and that which is beyond the self is firmly established in poetry that occurs as prayer. The transition from symbol in the early poetry to prayer later on is not a quick one. In between these early and later stages, the well undergoes several distinct transitions. Initially the well occurs as a symbol in *The Double Image* (1946).

³ Kouidis writes that “the well as source of Muse and self is allegorized in ‘A Pilgrim Dreaming’” (“Denise Levertov,” 264). I believe that the link between language and experience is closer than Kouidis’s comment suggests. I see the well image in “A Pilgrim Dreaming” as a living exploration in language of the speaker’s relationship with the world. I do not think, as Kouidis seems to, that Levertov uses the well image to allegorize an experience that occurs outside the poem.

⁴ Harry Marten, *Understanding Denise Levertov* (Columbia, South Carolina: U of South Carolina P, 1988) 17.

Then in *Here and Now* (1957) and *Overland to the Islands* (1958) symbolism gives way to objective images as they appear in the poetry of William Carlos Williams.

The Jacob's Ladder (1961) signals the beginning of an explicit connection between poetic vision and images of depth. The title poem connects the making of a poem with the task of climbing a stone stairwell. The model Levertov uses for the stairwell is the ladder that, in the book of Genesis, appears to Jacob. Despite the fact that in Jacob's dream the ladder ascends to heaven, the stairwell image is used in Levertov's poem to indicate the speaker's connection with the earth and the transcendence that is part and parcel of this connection: "The stairway is not / a thing of gleaming strands / a radiant evanescence / for angel's feet that only glance in their tread, and need not / touch the stone. / It is of stone."⁵ The notion of a transcendence that occurs within experience is reinforced by the image of the ocean: "After mist has wrapped us again / in fine wool, may the taste of salt / recall to us the great depths about us."⁶ In "The Well" and "The Illustration" the well is a site in which poetic vision and depth merge.⁷ In both poems the well is a "place of origin" that gives rise to the Muse. The experience of writing poetry is distilled in these images of the well, signalling Levertov's emerging capacity to integrate language with experience.

There is a strong political focus to the poetry in *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970) which speaks of the urgency of political action regarding the Vietnam war, the use of nuclear weapons, and environmental destruction. The

⁵ Levertov, "The Jacob's Ladder," *P*, 39.

⁶ Levertov, "The Depths," *P*, 17.

⁷ The poems "The Well" and "The Illustration" are collected in Levertov, *P* (40, 42).

well functions as an image of abundance and hope in the face of possible disaster.

As in *The Jacob's Ladder*, a connection between the well and poetry is evident in *To Stay Alive* (1971). This collection signals an enduring connection between the well and language in Levertov's poetry from this point on. Poetry and the well are presented as symbiotic in *Footprints* (1972) and *The Freeing of the Dust* (1975).

The influence of Williams culminates in *Life in the Forest* (1978) which communicates a range of feelings without naming them explicitly. This is a turning point in Levertov's career: it is as though she has mastered the art of saying something without needing to explain it or label it, and this paves the way for poetry in which images are not descriptive devices but autonomous "things." Thus, in *Candles in Babylon* (1982) and *Breathing the Water* (1987) the well occurs as an image that is an event in language or, in Blanchot's words, an image that takes us "into that other region where the distance holds us — the distance which then is the lifeless deep, an unmanageable, inappreciable remoteness which has become something like the sovereign power behind all beings."⁸ As well as describing the image in terms of "distance," Blanchot writes that "[t]he image is intimate."⁹ This helps explain why the image of the well provides a site for poetry that is prayer. *Candles in Babylon* grapples with uncertainty and maintains a position of faith throughout, and the poems in *Breathing the Water* can be read as evidence of Levertov's belief in poetry as a mode of spiritual practice.

⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1982) 261.

⁹ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 262.

From 1987 onwards, the poetry deals almost exclusively with matters of faith and doubt. These poems embody Levertov's exploration of the possibilities for relationship with what she refers to variously as "something other," "God," "the unknown." The well in both *Evening Train* (1992) and *Sands of the Well* (1996) is a site of contemplation. In these later poems, desire differs from that found in the early, British poems. While the early poems enact the speaker's longing to bridge the divide between inner and outer worlds, the later poems enact a desire that is not concerned with "inner" and "outer" but with desire as a space or distance out of which relationship arises. With regard to the later poetry, it is no longer correct to speak of the relation between inner and outer worlds, as though the speaker travels back and forwards between separate compartments. The later poetry deals, instead, with what makes relationship possible in the first place. A study of the well in Levertov's poems leads to an understanding of the development of desire, from an early imaginary relation between distinct inner and outer worlds to an impossibly infinite, generative space or distance in which relationship occurs.

The issues of experience and testimony are central to this thesis which acknowledges the importance Levertov places upon the poet's experience of writing. The distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, especially as inflected by Martin Heidegger, sheds light on the complexities involved in any discussion of experience. The distinction helps clarify the notion that both experience and testimony carry within them a division between being and meaning. In poetry this division enables transcendence to occur. One way in which transcendence can be approached is to consider the relation between possibility and impossibility. In discussing this relationship I explore the work of a range of contemporary thinkers, including Kevin Hart, Jacques

Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Heidegger, Albert Schweitzer, Simone Weil and Karl Rahner. As Levertov sees it, poetry transcends by placing individuals in relationship with what exceeds their conscious experience. In the later poetry transcendence is played out in language that occurs as prayer. Levertov believes that a stance of listening and receptivity is required in order for poetry to be experienced as prayer.

Levertov's poetry spans a period of fifty-five years, from 1940-1997, and is itself a testimony to the transformations which have taken place in her poetics. In the later poetry Levertov privileges listening over manipulation and thereby acknowledges the part played by those elements of experience which exceed intentionality and those elements of poetry which exceed representation. Changes in the way the well is presented at different stages in the poetry indicate the significant transformations that occur in the way the poet experiences relationship with the world. In the final three chapters of the thesis I attempt to recognise the image of the well in Levertov's poetry, not merely as a representation of an object, but as an event that takes place during the experience of poetry.

Ralph J. Mills provides a subtle and insightful summary of Levertov's experience of language, and this serves as a starting point for my own examination of Levertov's thinking. Mills states,

[h]er poetry is frequently a tour through the familiar and the mundane until their unfamiliarity and other-worldliness suddenly strikes us. Her imaginative gaze feasts on the small objects we usually treat as insignificant appendages to our lives, or pauses with affectionate interest on the seemingly trivial activities in which we spend so much of those lives. Thus she engages very naturally in a persistent investigation of the events of her own life — inner and outer — in the language of her own time and place,

and completes that investigation in the forms emerging from what she discovers as it is translated into words.¹⁰

Mills asserts that Levertov's quest has been "a persistent investigation of the events of her own life — inner and outer." He thereby indicates his awareness of the continuity that characterises Levertov's poetry. I agree that Levertov's poems are made up of "forms emerging from what she discovers as it is translated into words." These forms differ throughout her career — for example, symbols dominate the early poetry and images appear later on — however the movement remains the same: to recognise "unfamiliarity and other-worldliness" in the "familiar and the mundane." The poet's "imaginative gaze," then, must be directed inward and outward at once. That is, towards her relationship with the world. Surman observes this when she writes, "Denise Levertov's belief that one's inner discoveries should move hand in hand with one's outward perceptions has been the main impulse of her experiments in writing and her discussions of poetics."¹¹ My own discussion emphasises Levertov's ongoing attentiveness to the relationship between these "inner discoveries" and "outward perceptions." Levertov's poems — described aptly by Surman as "experiments in writing" — both embody and enhance this relationship.

Approximately half of the criticism of Levertov's poetry consists of insights into specific poems or comparisons between Levertov and other writers. Marilyn Kallet, for example, contributes an article on Levertov's poem, "A Tree Telling of Orpheus"; Peter G. Christensen considers the influence of Anton Chekhov upon Howard Moss and Levertov; Harry Marten

¹⁰ Ralph J. Mills, Jr. "Denise Levertov: Poetry of the Immediate," *Critical Essays on Denise Levertov*, ed. Linda Wagner-Martin (Boston: Hall, 1991) 99.

¹¹ Diana Surman, "Inside and Outside in the Poetry of Denise Levertov," *Critical Quarterly* 22.1 (1980) 60.

compares the poetry of Muriel Rukeyser and Levertov; and Edward Zlotkowski places Rainer Maria Rilke and Levertov side by side in his examination of the "aesthetic ethics" of both writers.¹² The other half of the criticism focuses on the "political," "feminist" or "spiritual" agendas in Levertov's work. The majority of these critics perceive these categories as clusters of issues that overlap necessarily with each other. For example, Dorothy Neilsen understands that Levertov,

is able to draw into her poetry many strands from what seems like contradictory schools, incompatible ideologies, and conflicting religious traditions. For Levertov, mysticism and politics inhere in one another, celebration and anguish are interdependent, the lyric and the didactic can cohabit in a poem, and the personal and the public are two sides of the communal.¹³

Neilsen discerns in Levertov's poetry the capacity to direct attention simultaneously towards "mysticism and politics," "celebration and anguish," "the lyric and the didactic" and "the personal and the public." While these twin concerns arise out of "what seems like contradictory schools, incompatible ideologies, and conflicting religious traditions," Neilsen and other critics — such as Anne Dewey, Paul A. Lacey, Linda A. Kinnahan, Kerry Driscoll, Lorrie Smith and Harry Marten — acknowledge that Levertov's poetry can sustain such diverse interests within a form that

¹² See Marilyn Kallet, "Moistening Our Roots with Music: Creative Power in Denise Levertov's 'A Tree Telling of Orpheus,'" *Twentieth-Century Literature* 38.2 (1992): 305-23; Peter G. Christensen, "Chekhov in the Poetry of Howard Moss and Denise Levertov," *South Atlantic Review* 54.4 (1989): 51-62; Harry Marten, "Exploring the Human Community: The Poetry of Denise Levertov and Muriel Rukeyser," *Sagetrieb* 3.3 (1984): 51-61; Edward Zlotkowski, "Levertov and Rilke: A Sense of Aesthetic Ethics," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 38.2 (1992): 324-42.

¹³ Dorothy Neilsen, "The Mystical / Political Poetry of Denise Levertov," diss., U of Western Ontario, 1991, 14.

connects rather than separates.¹⁴ My own argument, that Levertov's ethics and aesthetics are inseparable, is borne out of the view that categories such as "political," "feminist" and "spiritual" are intertwined in Levertov's poetry. This thesis is informed by this wide range of criticism.

However, my choice of topic has necessitated a long process of thought that occurs not only as a reply to existing criticism but as an attempt to address a more fundamental lack of critical insight into the image of the well and its significance in Levertov's poetry and poetics. In other words, the criticism is not like a supporting structure around which my thesis revolves. While I do refer to the criticism, my work is informed to a greater extent by theorists and philosophers who help me identify questions that must be asked when exploring topics such as experience, transcendence, listening and relationship. Among these thinkers are Hart, Derrida, Blanchot, Levinas, Heidegger, Schweitzer, Weil and Rahner. My belief is that the implications of this thesis extend beyond poetry criticism into poetics — that is, the study of how a discourse is made — and into how this making in turn affects the ethics and aesthetics of experience.

¹⁴ See Anne Dewey, "'The Art of the Octopus': The Maturation of Denise Levertov's Political Vision," *Renascence* 50.1-2 (1997-8): 65-81; Paul A. Lacey, "The Poetry of Political Anguish," *Sagetrieb* 4.1 (1985): 61-71; Linda A. Kinnahan, *Poetics of the Feminine: Authority and Literary Tradition in William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov, and Kathleen Fraser* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994); Kerry Driscoll, "A Sense of Unremitting Emergency: Politics in the Early Work of Denise Levertov," *Critical Essays on Denise Levertov*, ed. Linda Wagner-Martin (Boston: Hall, 1991) 148-56; Lorrie Smith, "Dialogue and the Political Imagination in Denise Levertov and Adrienne Rich," *World, Self, Poem: Essays on Contemporary Poetry from the 'Jubilation of Poets,'* ed. Leonard M. Trawick (Kent, Ohio: Kent State UP, 1990): 155-62; and Harry Marten, *Understanding Denise Levertov*.

CHAPTER ONE

Levertov's Poetics

Levertov's thinking about poetry can be described not only as a "poetics" but as a "poethics," that is, a thinking in which aesthetics and ethics cannot be separated. Levertov's poetics — that is, her thinking on poetry as well as her praxis — is a poetics of listening. In her faithfulness to the activity of listening in poetry Levertov highlights the interconnectedness of poetry and ethics. Poetry, for her, does not exist in a hermetic "literary" realm but acts in the world. The imagination, as she sees it, "is a creative function, producing new forms and transforming existing ones; and these come into being in the world, autonomous objects available to others, and capable of transforming them."¹⁵ The imaginative energy from which these new "autonomous objects" arise is fundamentally an ethical force with the power to transform those who encounter it. While Levertov refers to the forms that arise out of the imagination as "autonomous objects" she is not implying that she would support a theoretical separation between a perceiving subject and the perceived object. Her thinking about poetry shifts the emphasis of the word "autonomous" away from the notion that subject and object are separate entities. It moves, instead, towards an acknowledgement of the deep

¹⁵ Levertov, "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," early 1980s, *NSE*, 145-6. The date of this essay is "early 1980s" because it consists of a series of three lectures delivered separately over a period of several years.

involvement that exists between all forms of life and the environments in which they live.

The first three chapters discuss Levertov's poetics with reference to the ideas of several philosophers, among them Hart, Blanchot, Derrida, Levinas and Heidegger. I discuss, in relation to poetry, the concepts of experience, transcendence and listening. My exploration of each of these themes highlights the ethical concerns that lie at the heart of Levertov's poetics. The second half of the thesis, comprising three chapters, pays careful attention to the poetry itself. The image of the well appears throughout Levertov's poetry. It is a site of desire that shifts from a seam between inner and outer worlds, in the early poetry, to an open space out of which relationship arises in the later poetry. Three distinct periods, which are divided into early (1946-1957), middle (1958-1978) and later poetry (1982-1996) are discussed according to the way in which the image of the well occurs in each stage.

In the 1950s Levertov moved from Britain, where she was born, to the United States of America where she became an American citizen. Alongside this major geographical shift occurred a gradual change in her spiritual beliefs, from atheism to agnosticism and finally Catholicism. Her father, a Russian Jew, also experienced a change in his spiritual beliefs. He experienced a conversion and became an Anglican priest when Levertov was still a child. The simple description I offer of a progression in Levertov's spiritual life from atheism to Catholicism fails to capture the subtleties and complexities involved in each of these shifts. However, while the focus of the thesis is upon Levertov's poetics and poetry, rather than the events of her life, insight into these important transitions can, to some extent, be achieved by studying the ways in which the poetry changes throughout Levertov's career.

Levertov declines strongly an invitation to classify her poetry according to stylistic or historical categories: "I've written poems in the country about country kinds of things. But as far as terms like 'classic,' 'preclassic,' 'romantic' and so forth, I don't really think it is for the poets themselves to help the critic define those kinds of things. I really don't."¹⁶ Although she is not interested in helping "define" things for the critic, her generous interview dialogues and numerous essays outlining her poetics serve as vital sources for readers and critics who wish to understand the connections between the development of her thinking on poetry and the development of the poetry itself from the early British poems through to the 1990s prayer-poems. Throughout the thesis I will refer to her interviews and dialogues in order to expand and clarify issues relating to her poetics.

In her three books of prose Levertov writes in great detail about her attitudes towards poetry, religion and politics. Poetry, for her, is a form of prayer, not in the sense of petition but as an activity of reflection, stillness and discovery. It is a chance for her to pay full attention. The emphasis for Levertov is always upon the stance of attention rather than on the thing being attended to. This can be seen in the changes that take place in the image of the well. They do not occur simply as a change in the structure or appearance of the well but as a change in the relationship that exists between the well and the world. Close attention to the image of the well reveals corresponding changes in the way Levertov thinks of and practises poetry.

¹⁶ Levertov, "Denise Levertov: An Interview," by Michael Andre, 1971-2, *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1998) 59.

Levertov writes that "when words penetrate deep into us they change the chemistry of the soul."¹⁷ In order to have words change us we need to be in a stance of receptivity in relation to them so that we are capable not only of reading but of responding. To write at length about the theory of Levertov's faithful attention and what it might mean for her to experience God is something I struggle to do since the language I use in this kind of analysis is explanatory and does not come close to the kinds of things I am trying to explain. This difficulty also arises from my belief that the poetry is what requires the most attention, and I mean attention, being with it and listening to it, rather than spending just long enough reading to be able to view it in the light of the theory and philosophy that I read. My view is shared by Martin Duwell, a teacher in the English department at the University of Queensland, who comments on the need for poetry critics to attend to poetry closely enough to get to know it, rather than using it hastily as evidence or backup for their arguments. Duwell writes, "[i]f you approach a poem saying, 'I haven't really got time to get to know you but do you mind telling me about yourself so that I can say something using you in an argument in which you would have little interest,' the poem won't have anything interesting to say to you."¹⁸ He also draws attention to "the phenomenon of continuously shying away from literature to the study of something else: language, the nature of criticism, culture . . . literary history, discourse, society."¹⁹ He writes that "[a]ll generalisations of any value are the result of inductive processes based on observed detail. But the desire to generalise impedes the full appreciation of details in

¹⁷ Levertov, "The Poet in the World," 1967, *NSE*, 136. "The Poet in the World" was written for a literary symposium in Geneseo, New York, in 1967, and was originally published in Levertov, *PIW*, 107-16.

¹⁸ Martin Duwell, "Unsung Poetry Falls on Deaf Ears," *The Australian* 11 Oct. 2000, 45.

¹⁹ Duwell, "Unsung Poetry," 45.

themselves."²⁰ He continues, "[i]t is a basic, epistemological problem more acutely felt in some areas than in others and it is particularly pointed in the case of poetry. The desire to fit poems into some fabrication called literary history, or whatever, prevents people from becoming the good readers that poetry so desperately needs."²¹ It would be easy to discount Duwell as camped on the poetry side of a poetry-philosophy divide, or to think that he probably is not interested in the all-important context of a poem. However, he merely calls for a balance between attention to detail and generalisation, and notices that some critics of poetry too frequently prop themselves up with generalisation. It is tempting to use poetry as a proof text to substantiate one's claims but this leaves little time for the poetry itself. What I continually strive to do is to work the other way around, to spend enough time with the poetry so that I come to know *its* concerns. While the first three chapters of this thesis are an extended discussion of the themes of experience, transcendence and listening as they are important to Levertov's poetics, the subsequent three chapters draw on this discussion in an attempt to listen to the concerns of the poetry itself.

"Political" Poetry

The main aim of this thesis is to show that Levertov's poetry is primarily an ethical response. For Levertov, poetry arises out of the connection between the poet and the historical context in which the poet writes. Politics, from this perspective, is already part of a poem rather than featuring as a separate concern. Levertov outlines her belief that politics cannot be divorced from other aspects of a poet's life:

A poet driven to speak to himself, to maintain a dialogue with himself, concerning politics, can expect to write as well upon that theme as upon any other. He can not separate it from

²⁰ Duwell, "Unsung Poetry," 45.

²¹ Duwell, "Unsung Poetry," 45.

everything else in his life. But it is not whether or not good 'political' poems are a possibility that is in question. What is in question is the role of the poet as observer or as participant in the life of his time. And if history is invoked to prove that more poets have stood aside, have watched or ignored the events of their moment in history, than have spent time and energy in bodily participation in those events, I must answer that a sense of history must involve a sense of the present, a vivid awareness of change, a response to crisis, a realization that what was appropriate in this or that situation in the past is inadequate to the demands of the present, that we are living our whole lives in a state of emergency which is — for reasons I'm sure I don't have to spell out for you by discussing nuclear and chemical weapons or ecological disasters and threats — unparalleled in all history.²²

The poet's personal experience is always bound up with the experience of the events of history. Spending "time and energy in bodily participation in those events" fosters her awareness of the possibilities for appropriate change in the present.

In response to the question "[c]an partisan, polemical content, in whatever poetic form it appears, be good poetry?"²³ Levertov notes that "[t]his seems to me strictly a modern question, having its roots in the Romantic period but not really troubling anyone until the late nineteenth century."²⁴ For Levertov, it is important that there be no division in poetry criticism, as in poetry, between what is political and what is not:

The separation between poetry of political content and all other poetry is an artificial one. Poets who are conscious and concerned about the world around them may quite naturally sometimes write poems arising from that awareness, just as they may write about anything else that impinges upon and affects their being . . . There is, in fact, an underlying arrogance in the condemnation of 'engaged' poetry as an illegitimate, essentially anti-literary endeavor: who dare fix the limits of any art?²⁵

²² Levertov, "The Poet in the World," *NSE*, 137.

²³ Levertov, "On the Edge of Darkness: What is Political Poetry?" 1975, *LUC*, 116.

²⁴ Levertov, "What is Political Poetry?" *LUC*, 116.

²⁵ Levertov, "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," *NSE*, 150-1.

Clearly what matters for Levertov is that poets "are conscious and concerned about the world around them," not whether their words are considered "political." She asserts that "political poetry does not obey special laws but must be subject to those which govern every kind of poetry."²⁶ Likewise, Robert von Hallberg calls for a redefinition of political poetry to include not only oppositional poems but poems of the everyday as well.²⁷ Von Hallberg wishes that the category "politics" would expand to include, not just political didacticism, but many different kinds of experience:

political poetry, if not poetry in general, is commonly (and too narrowly) understood now to be oppositional by definition. Even a centrist critic like Frank Kermode has argued that 'literature which achieves permanence is likely to be "transgressive"...[the art] of the stranger in conflict with the settled order.'²⁸

Von Hallberg is far more captivated by poetry's engagement with the world than with its potential to be classified. He mentions the poetry of Samuel Johnson, John Dryden, Alexander Pope and Ezra Pound, all of whom, he believes, write with a fascination for the specifics of their world. He argues that "[c]riticism needs a way of esteeming this poetry, not because the details are heterogenous, but because they are thorny and abundant evidence of a citizen's passionate engagement less in a party than

²⁶ Levertov, "What is Political Poetry?" *LUC*, 127.

²⁷ Kevin Hart's chapter "Everyday Life in Johnson" in his *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 156-179, discusses the mostly untheorized word "everyday." He writes, "[i]t seems that we should already know what 'every day' means" (160) and "the everyday has become the ground against which people and events cut figures, and it recedes as we approach it in search of a positive definition" (165). Hart makes reference to several thinkers who discuss the everyday: Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984); Maurice Blanchot, "Everyday Speech" in his *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. and foreword Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1993); and Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973).

²⁸ Robert von Hallberg, "Politics and Poetry," *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993) 962.

in a particular moment."²⁹ This resonates with Levertov's statement that "poems present their testimony as circumstantial evidences, not as closing argument."³⁰

Testimony

The distinction Levertov makes between "circumstantial evidence" and "closing argument" is important, especially when viewed in the light of her use of the word "testimony." While Levertov does not attempt to clarify the word "testimony," its significance in relation to the rest of her thinking regarding poetry and experience necessitates a brief conversation with a couple of thinkers, Ricoeur and Derrida, both of whom approach the word "testimony" with the intention of unraveling some of its meanings and implications for philosophy, theology and literature.

Ricoeur declares that "[t]he term testimony should be applied to words, works, actions, and to lives which attest to an intention, an inspiration, an idea at the heart of experience and history which nonetheless transcend experience and history."³¹ He believes there are limitations for a philosophy that attempts to treat testimony as a matter of absolute knowledge without regard to the involvement of consciousness: "The philosophical problem of testimony is the problem of the testimony of the absolute or, better, of absolute testimony of the absolute. The question is only proper if the absolute makes sense for consciousness."³² He thereby introduces an interiority to the problem that cannot be reduced to a philosophical concept but must be approached with a view to interpreting each instance of testimony which will be both characteristic

²⁹ von Hallberg, "Politics and Poetry," *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*.

³⁰ Levertov, "A Poet's View," 1984, *NSE*, 246.

³¹ Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 119-20.

³² Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," 120.

and unique, or in other words, circumstantial. As Ricoeur sees it, testimony is a situation in which consciousness always has one foot in experience and history and one foot beyond them.

For Derrida, testimony is both singular and universal. He perceives this doubleness as arising out of a division or an aporia that lies at the crossing of possibility and impossibility. He points out that while religious testimony attests to a singular truth, it also always remains a secret. Thus testimony always fails to live up to its promise to tell all. The only way to cope with this failure is to examine singular truth in the context of universality, that is, in the context of how another person would testify if they were in exactly the same situation:

In saying: I swear to tell the truth, where I have been the only one to see or hear and where I am the only one who can attest to it, this is true to the extent that anyone who *in my place*, at that instant, would have seen or heard or touched the same thing and could repeat exemplarily, universally, the truth of my testimony. The exemplarity of the "instant," that which makes it an "instance," if you like, is that it is singular, like any exemplarity, singular *and* universal, singular *and* universalizable. The singular must be universalizable; this is the testimonial condition.³³

Testimony then is bound up with verifiability. If it did not contain its own impossibility then it would cease to be testimony. As Derrida puts it, "if testimony thereby became proof, information, certainty, or archive, it would lose its function as testimony."³⁴ It seems to me that poetry, experience and testimony are closely related. A look at their interaction is an important step in understanding poetry's ethical potential. Richard

³³ Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, bound with Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000) 41. Derrida's discussion of testimony is foreshadowed in *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993) when he asks "[i]s this an aporia? Where do we situate it? In the impossibility or in the possibility of an impossibility (which is not necessarily the same thing)? What can the possibility of an impossibility be? How can we *think* that? How can we *say* it while respecting logic and meaning? How can we approach that, live, or *exist* it? How does one *testify* to it?" (68).

³⁴ Derrida, *Demeure*, 29-30.

Kearney highlights the power of "moral testament" to influence experience:

The exemplary imagination works by witness not by dogmatism, by intuition rather than by abstraction. Just as the Greeks had the image of Achilles in their mind's eye when they spoke of courage, Christians the image of Christ or St Francis when they spoke of love, every concept of the good needs to be exemplified in particular narratives. And not simply by way of illustrating or *reproducing* a principle. The narratives and parables can actually produce the doctrine. This central role of exemplary imagination would seem to suggest a priority of moral testament over moral theory, reminding us that the latter is founded on the former.³⁵

"[M]oral testament" can create "doctrine." Testament is dependent neither upon "abstraction" nor "theory" but upon experience. Poetry's testament to history is really its testament to experience. Consequently, poetry contributes to the creation of history. Although creating and testifying appear to function differently — creating is surely active and powerful while testifying is passive and negligible in its power — I want to emphasise the event of their interaction and thereby highlight their combined ethical potency.

Throughout this thesis I attempt to show that poetry and ethics are intertwined. Kearney suggests that "[t]he poetic commitment to *story-telling* may well prove indispensable to the ethical commitment to *history-making*. Ethics without poetics leads to the censoring of imagination; poetics without ethics leads to dangerous play."³⁶ Poetry's capacity to tell, or to function as testimony, prevents it from being relegated to an isolated aesthetic compartment cut off from experience and history. Poetry, like any other discourse, has a poetics, that is, a process by which it is made. In the following section I explore the poetics of poetry in order to identify and

³⁵ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: from Husserl to Lyotard* (London: Harper, 1991) 222-3.

³⁶ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 228.

reinforce poetry's essential role in bringing about an ethics that is not merely abstract but grounded in experience and history.³⁷

"Poetics" points in a couple of different directions. Terry Brogan defines "poetics" as "a systematic theory of poetry" which "attempts to define the nature of poetry, its kinds and forms, its resources of device and structure, the principles that govern it, the functions that distinguish it from other arts, the conditions under which it can exist, and its effects on readers or auditors."³⁸ However, poetics is not necessarily concerned with poetry. Todorov's *Poetics of Prose*, for example, is not a study of poetry but the way in which a text is composed. While Brogan declares that the term "poetics" derives from Aristotle's *Peri poetikē* which served as "the prototype of all later treatises on the art of poetry formal or informal (e.g. Horace, Dante, Sidney, Shelley, Valéry),"³⁹ it is Roger Crisp who clarifies the fact that poetics includes but is not confined to poetry. He highlights that, for Aristotle, *poiēsis* is "behaviour aimed at an external end" and "is characteristic of crafts — e.g. building, the end of which is houses. It is thus a *kinēsis* (process)."⁴⁰ This ancient view of craft as "building" initiated the current Western concern with process, not only in poetry but also in a wide range of other crafts.

Perhaps the biggest turning point in the history of poetics is the Romantic era which produced poets, artists, and thinkers such as William

³⁷ Coady writes about the implications in many different areas of research and practice of the lack of attention given by philosophers to the topic of testimony: "Finally, the neglect of the topic by philosophers has left many important questions of law, history, psychology and religion to be debated without the benefit of concentrated philosophical input. These include such matters as the status of children's testimony at law, the problems posed by expert evidence, psychological claims about the unreliability of eye-witness identifications, and certain aspects of historical methodology, including the 'higher' biblical criticism." This statement appears in Edward Craig, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 10 vols. (London: Routledge, 1998) 313. See also C.A.J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1992).

³⁸ Brogan, "Poetics," *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 930.

³⁹ Brogan, "Poetics," *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 930.

⁴⁰ Roger Crisp, "Poiēsis," *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999).

Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, August Wilhelm Schlegel (who popularised the views of his brother, Friedrich Schlegel),⁴¹ Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, all of whom contest the ancient idea that art imitates the external world.⁴² For these figures the question of how poetry is made revolves around subjective processes rather than objective standards. Poetry takes place as a journey in which a subject "transcends the merely personal."⁴³ Thus in transcendence subjectivity is at once preserved and contested.

Transcendence

The word "transcendence" has been variously defined in both theology and philosophy. In Chapter Two I discuss "transcendence" in Levertov's poetry and draw upon the work of Heidegger, Levinas, Gadamer, Hart and Rahner. These thinkers view "transcendence" as occurring within experience. The notion of a horizon within which transcendence occurs was first introduced by Heidegger. He advocates a horizontal transcendence as opposed to a vertical transcendence which would involve going beyond or rising above. In *Being and Time* "the word 'horizon' is used with a connotation somewhat different from that to which the English-speaking reader is likely to be accustomed. We tend to think of a horizon as something which we may widen or extend or go beyond; Heidegger, though, seems to think of it rather as something which we can neither widen nor go beyond, but which provides the limits for certain intellectual activities performed 'within' it."⁴⁴ Transcendence is, however,

⁴¹ Claudia Brodsky Lacour, "Romantic and Postromantic Poetics," *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1084.

⁴² Brogan, "Poetics," *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 935.

⁴³ Brogan, "Poetics," *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 935.

⁴⁴ John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, trans. *Being and Time*, by Martin Heidegger (San Francisco: Harper, 1962) 1n4.

not limited to the categories "horizontal" and "vertical," and can occur in a variety of ways.

Karl Lehmann points out that transcendence can take place as "rational modes of knowing, affective and mystical ecstasy, 'union,' faith, silence, concrete action, historical practice."⁴⁵ While he offers a number of definitions of transcendence — epistemological, metaphysical, anthropocentric, theological and strict theological transcendence⁴⁶ — he points out that modern philosophers such as Karl Jaspers interrogate these definitions and that consequently the meanings of "transcendence" have altered significantly. For example, Jean Wahl recounts the changes that Husserl and Heidegger have initiated: "Husserl believes that thought is always turned towards something other than itself. And Heidegger contends that this idea of intentionality as it is found in Husserl is rooted in an idea which is deeper than the idea of intentionality and which is the idea of transcendence."⁴⁷ Thus Heidegger attempts to rethink transcendence as a movement that is found within thought itself. In this way Heidegger demonstrates his interest in ontological transcendence which revolves

⁴⁵ Karl Lehmann, "Transcendence," *Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Seabury, 1975).

⁴⁶ Lehmann, "Transcendence." He writes, "[t]he following formal distinctions are to be made. Transcendence (or transcendent) means: (i) the realm going beyond consciousness and independent of it: epistemological transcendence; (ii) the absolute, supra-sensible 'beyond,' where knowledge of the idea (form) or essence (abstraction, intuition) and of its ultimate justification (deduction) rises above the multiplicity and mobility of phenomena and sensible experience, in a non-temporal, non-empirical ground: metaphysical transcendence; (iii) an opening out to the truth itself, to the absolute, indefeasible and incomprehensible horizon of human thought and will, which is either explicated metaphysically or theologically, or remains an open dimension or is totally reduced to the anthropocentric; (iv) the absolute otherness and freedom of God as regarded the world attained by the 'desacralization' of the world, where God's inmost nature remains unknown to man and is best expressed in the categories of the holy and of mystery: theological transcendence; (v) the truly divine godhead of God, which is absolutely beyond the range of all human powers, absolutely unattainable in spite of all connaturality but discloses itself in free self-communication, where the incalculable gratuitousness of grace and the supernatural order brings the movement of human transcendence to its intrinsic limit and the moment of its transformation: strict theological transcendence."

around Being, as opposed to ontic transcendence which is concerned with concrete entities and their properties.⁴⁸ Modern theories of transcendence share Heidegger's preoccupation with transcendence that can be experienced. Gabriel Marcel points out that "there must exist a possibility of having an experience of the transcendent as such, and unless that possibility exists the word can have no meaning."⁴⁹ From Levertov's perspective, transcendence occurs in experience. Her poems do not merely gesture towards the possibility of transcending but they are themselves testimonies to the actual event of transcendence in experience. In addition to the discussion of "testimony" above, the thesis also examines the words "event," "transcendence" and "experience" as they relate to poetry.

Transcendence is also a concern in twentieth-century poetics which holds to the notion of poetry as a discourse among other discourses. Both Romantic and post-Romantic poetics agree that in poetry the personal is transcended. It is not my intention to explore at length affinities between Levertov and particular poetic traditions. I want, instead, to suggest that transcendence has always already occurred in poetry and therefore poetry is primarily an event of relationship. At the heart of Levertov's poetics lies a fascination with relationship. Each chapter of the thesis is devoted in its own way to exploring this fascination.

As Levertov sees it, relationship cannot occur without "autonomy." Her use of the word is somewhat different from the dictionary definition of "autonomy" as "[l]iberty to follow one's will, personal freedom."⁵⁰ She would never claim that any form of life can have absolute "freedom." In

⁴⁷ Jean Wahl, *Philosophies of Existence: An Introduction to the Basic Thought of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Sartre*, trans. F.M. Lory (London: Routledge, 1969) 46.

⁴⁸ Macquarrie and Robinson, *Being and Time*, 31n3.

⁴⁹ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery* (London: Harvill, 1950) 46.

⁵⁰ "Autonomy," *OED*.

her view, the dynamic interconnections between all forms of life and the myriad global systems, whether natural or man-made, necessitate an involvement that rules out the possibility of always being free to “follow one’s will.” However, she believes that in order for this organic involvement to take place, and thus for poetry to be able to act in the world, a certain “freedom” is essential. Specifically, in order for a poem to act it must be fundamentally autonomous from structured systems of thought such as aesthetics, politics or any other theory that would attempt to encompass it.

In describing this process of reciprocal transformation between poet and world, Levertov uses the paradigm of translation. She declares that “[w]e need a new realization of *the artist as translator*.”⁵¹ Just as a translator’s task is not merely to decode one language into another but to reveal what is new in language, the poet’s task is not merely to describe events but to experience them in language for the first time. The poet is as much an “experiencer” as she is a creator. The evidence for this is in the fact that she herself is translated in the event of writing. With art in mind, Levertov explores some meanings opened up by the word “translate”:

My 1865 Webster’s defines *translation* as ‘being conveyed from one place to another; removed to heaven without dying.’ We must have an art that translates, conveys us to the heaven of that deepest reality . . . that *transmits* us there, not in the sense of bringing out information to the receiver but of putting the receiver in the place of the event — alive. *Transmit* (like *mission* and *missive*) comes from the same Latin root (*mittere*, ‘to send’) as *mettre* and *mettere* in French and Italian, both meaning ‘to put.’⁵²

The key phrase in this passage is “removed to heaven without dying.” The fact that an individual can be carried to heaven does not mean that the self is extinguished. In the same way that language is enhanced in translation,

⁵¹ Levertov, “Great Possessions,” 1970, *NSE*, 123.

⁵² Levertov, “Great Possessions,” *NSE*, 123-4.

the self not only survives the event but discovers unexpected possibilities. This fact of survival coupled with an experience of possibility is described by Levertov as "the heaven of that deepest reality." Somehow "reality" and "heaven" coexist within the same experience as part of one another. The "place of the event" of poetry is neither "heaven" nor "reality" but both.

Levertov agrees with Marcel Proust's declaration that "[t]he duty and task of a writer are those of a translator"⁵³ and points out that "the word ['translation'] comes from the past participle of the Latin *transfere*, 'to transfer': to carry across, to ferry to the far shore." What can be said about "the far shore" to which poetry carries us and what is it about this "place of the event" that compels Levertov to call it "alive"? Levertov looks at poetry as an event by connecting it with the flight of Pegasus:

Jane Harrison, in *Themis*, speaks in passing of Pegasus 'receiving' Dionysos at Eleutherae; being given, that is, in a powerful and unmistakable flash of recognition, the perception of a divinity. If it is indeed our Pegasus she refers to, I would interpret this event as emblematic of the way in which creative power has no upper limit; a sublime potential remains even when poetry has seemed to fly to the extremes of its own possibility."⁵⁴

While poetry realises "the extremes of its own possibility" it also reveals "a sublime potential." Importantly, the epiphany of "a powerful and unmistakable flash of recognition, the perception of a divinity," is "given" to Pegasus. No amount of flying on his part will bring about the recognition he needs to continue his flight: only when he is receptive — capable of "receiving" Dionysos — can his flight continue. It is important to remember that, as Levertov sees it, Pegasus doesn't actually go anywhere. I am interested to know what it means to discover "divinity"

⁵³ Levertov, "Great Possessions," *NSE*, 123.

and "possibility" on a flight that has no defined flight path. How can a flight that is not really a flight at all involve such important discoveries?

Levertov offers a useful way of approaching the mysterious flight of Pegasus. She believes that "[s]ince almost all experience goes by too fast, too superficially for our apperception, what we most need is not to re-taste it (just as superficially) but really to taste *for the first time* the gratuitous, the autonomous identity of its essence."⁵⁵ It seems that the flight of Pegasus is a continual "first time" experience. Like "all experience" it is too quick for Pegasus to understand fully. And this flight in particular is so quick because the distance it covers is the distance to the heart of an event: without going anywhere Pegasus flies into the heart of his own experience. All experience, it seems, is fundamentally "gratuitous" and "autonomous." It is too quick for "our apperception" and there is no way of slowing it down. In the face of our strenuous efforts to understand our own experience it turns out that the raw material, that is the experience itself, escapes us. Any attempt to make sense of our experience must always encounter this impasse.

Witness

In a passage about the relationship between doubt and hope, Levertov introduces the notion of "witness." Given that our experience will always get away from us, we find ourselves witnessing events rather than grasping them or understanding them fully. It follows then that the impasse characterising experience must also be witnessed. If there is anything about experience we can strive to understand it is the potent effects of this impasse. What effect does it have? We cannot summarize

⁵⁴ Levertov, "Horses with Wings," 1984, *NSE*, 115. Jane Ellen Harrison is the author of *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1927). Levertov makes reference to ideas on pp 315-6 of this book.

our experience as though it is a fact or collection of facts, and yet we are the only ones who know what our own experiences are like. What form does such "knowing" take?

Levertov's poem, "Witness: Incommunicado," suggests that witnessing occurs before events are embodied in language:

They speak of bonding. Of the infant, the primitive
without sense of boundary, everything as much
or as little itself as itself.

Yet what loneliness,
the solitude
of thought before language. A kind of darkness
stirring the mind, blurring
the glare and glitter of vision,
steam on the white mirror.⁵⁶

Prior to language, there is a "kind of darkness / stirring the mind, blurring / the glare and glitter of vision." Then the language of testimony gives voice to that which is witnessed. Language provides the "sense of boundary" lacking in the lonely, foggy place of witnessing. While the "darkness" before language hosts "the infant, the primitive" awareness, testimony is the communication of that awareness. The kind of knowing that takes place in witnessing is also a not-knowing. Levertov values, for example, our inability to know what the future holds:

All of us feel sometimes that it is already too late; but this feeling alternates with the powerful creative energy, the will to live and to preserve life, we all carry in us somewhere. Just because — prophets, poets, or listeners, readers — we are *not* (or are very seldom and then unreliably) oracular, we *do not* know that the worst is bound to happen; and that suspension in not-knowing, bleak though it is, is the source of hope. And hope *also* calls for witness, for the articulation poetic art (call it prophecy if you will) can give it.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Levertov, "Great Possessions," *NSE*, 123.

⁵⁶ Levertov, *SW*, 94.

⁵⁷ Levertov, "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival." *NSE*, 149.

She perceives that, from an ecological point of view, "it is already too late" for the species which have been destroyed, and for the people who have lost their lives because of polluted air and waterways. However, she highlights that we do not know what will happen to the world — "do not know that the worst is bound to happen" — and this in itself is a cause for hope and, Levertov believes, a call to witness. If we are receptive to the chance for witnessing, as opposed to controlling, the relationship we have with our surrounding ecosystems then our kind of knowing radically shifts. Viewed in this way, our knowing no longer takes place in isolation, as though relationship can be thought of entirely in abstract terms. Knowing takes place in the event of relationship, and knowing, like the relationship itself, is not knowledge *of* but knowledge *in*.

The word "knowing" gives a clue to its form: unlike knowledge, which suggests an object, knowing suggests process. It now becomes clear why "it is already too late." Not only are we unable to turn back the clock, to return to our past, we are also unable to grasp it completely. In experience we are faced with limitations that reside outside of us, in a temporality that steals experience from us and whisks us into the next experience. This is why Levertov places special emphasis upon a poet's capacity to witness events. In poetry that is testimony she demonstrates her belief that witnessing or "suspension in not-knowing, bleak though it is, is the source of hope." The choice of hope over despair is a theme that is dealt with at length in her various essays. Her motivations are pragmatic, humanistic and theological, to mention the main areas of inquiry she incorporates into her poetics, but the best explanation I can come up with for her decision to choose hope over despair is an old-fashioned leap of faith.

The phrase, "leap of faith" resonates in my mind with Hart's comment that experience always involves a sense of peril or danger: Hart points out that the word "experience" retains some of its Latin root "*experiri*, 'to test' or 'to try' (and within that, *peiri*, from which we get 'peril')." He adds that this "keeps in play a notion of experience as a setting at risk, a voyage that may well involve danger."⁵⁸ Levertov demonstrates that experience involves risk not only in her life-long commitment to being a radical agent of change for human rights and the environment but also in the way she views less tangible issues such as the presence or absence of God. She knows that a leap of faith is not simply a decision one makes in order to calm the confusion thrown up in contemplation. Rather, it is an ethical action that propels an individual into an encounter with the unknown or, as Levertov puts it, into "suspension in not-knowing."⁵⁹ If experience in general "may involve danger" then "suspension in not-knowing" certainly will. Levertov's poem, "Suspended" articulates beautifully the speaker's response to her own experience of "not knowing":

I had grasped God's garment in the void
 but my hand slipped
 on the rich silk of it.
 The 'everlasting arms' my sister loved to remember
 must have upheld my leaden weight
 from falling, even so,
 for though I claw at empty air and feel
 nothing, no embrace,
 I have not plummeted.⁶⁰

This poem attests to the speaker's discovery that, despite her unsuccessful attempt to "grasp God's garment in the void," something has sustained and supported her all along. I use the word "something" but in this poem the word "nothing" is central. The discovery that grasping at the air yields

⁵⁸ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," *Boxkite* 2 (1999) 293.

⁵⁹ Levertov, "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," *NSE*, 149.

nothing — “I claw at empty air and feel / nothing, no embrace” — is precisely the revelation the speaker needs in order to realise that she is not without support. Her observation, “I have not plummeted” comes about as a result of her discovery not of some specific thing but of “nothing.”

Within “nothing” the speaker perceives invisible “everlasting arms.” The fact that form is unseen and discovered in “nothing” leads me to wonder whether the form discovered in this poem corresponds to the form that Levertov witnesses in poetry in general. For Levertov, poetry, and “political poetry” in particular, facilitates

a sense of the interdependence of all things, a sense of belonging to, rather than dominating, an ecosystem; and of the osmosis, the reciprocal nature, of the sustaining relationship between the parts of an ecosystem.

One of the political things poetry, whether or not overtly political in its content, can do is to reveal that unity, that trembling web of being.⁶¹

The “trembling web of being” can be compared with the “everlasting arms” in “Suspended.” Both forms emphasise a world that is autonomous in relation to human life. It is not that humans cannot have an impact upon the world but that human life plays a part in it rather than being the controlling force behind it. As Levertov puts it, poetry fosters “a sense of the interdependence of all things, a sense of belonging to, rather than dominating, an ecosystem.”⁶² From an evolutionary perspective, human life comes after most other life and it makes sense that “the reciprocal nature, of the sustaining relationship between the parts of the ecosystem” must be acknowledged and accepted by humans. After all, it is the various ecosystems that make human life possible in the first place. The “everlasting arms” and the “trembling web of being,” which evoke the idea of God and of nature respectively, are discovered in Levertov’s poetry in

⁶⁰ Levertov, *ET*, 119.

⁶¹ Levertov, “Poetry, Prophecy, Survival,” *NSE*, 152.

the relationship humans have with them rather than through objective analysis. Thus discovery is an event in which it is likely that "nothing," that is, no specific object or thing, is found.

Like the "trembling web of being," poetry's form is discovered rather than identified from a distance. Form in poetry conventionally includes such devices as linebreaks, typography, and sound combinations. However, there is also an invisible form that arises out of the event of a poem, and specifically out of the poet's experience of listening: "if you are attentive enough to what is happening to you, a poem can arise out of those events which will be found to have form. I call it organic form because it is not a form imposed but a form discovered in the relation of the events."⁶³ An aesthetics that arises out of being "attentive enough to what is happening to you" is an aesthetics of listening rather than a conventional aesthetics of poetic technique.

For Levertov, it is not enough for a poet to be technically or intellectually skilled. She must be deeply in touch with "the relation of the events" or, in other words, she must have access to what Levertov calls "total meaning."⁶⁴ It is difficult, if not impossible, to define "total meaning," since the phrase hints at something that is witnessed rather than grasped intellectually. Levertov states that "you can't leave feeling out of meaning — total meaning, that is."⁶⁵ In an interview with Walter Sutton she talks about an approach to poetry that involves something other than analysis. In response to Sutton's comment that "[c]ontemporary criticism has strenuously concerned itself with the analysis of meaning and

⁶² Levertov, "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," *NSE*, 152.

⁶³ Levertov, "A Conversation with Denise Levertov," by Walter Sutton, 1965, Brooker, *Conversations*, 11.

⁶⁴ Levertov, "A Conversation," Sutton, Brooker, *Conversations*, 16.

⁶⁵ Levertov, "A Conversation," Sutton, Brooker, *Conversations*, 16.

imagery,"⁶⁶ she states that "the average critic tends to talk about what has been said and not about the sounds in which it is said . . . and the way the sounds can carry the emotion of the poem."⁶⁷ She departs from this critical tendency to "talk about what has been said" and highlights instead the processes involved in listening to, rather than critiquing, poetry:

I'm in the midst of writing about ways of listening because I've noticed something about many audiences, who, even though they are *enjoying* poetry readings...have been conditioned by analytical experiences with poems, in school, I suppose. The lines that will most often cause a murmur of approval are lines that confirm in an almost epigrammatic way something which the audience already knows or feels. And there are whole areas of poetry, modern poetry especially, that people with those particular listening habits are really cut off from.⁶⁸

Levertov's interest in listening helps her to rethink some of the learned habits of reading that limit an audience's experience of poetry. She wishes to point out ways in which a poem can be approached and thus to enable readers, or more correctly "listeners," to recognise in a poem that "which the audience already knows or feels." Her suggestion is that readers listen better by becoming less alert intellectually.

Drawing on John Keats's well-known definition of Negative Capability, Levertov argues for a listening that is not merely an intellectual activity but an engagement involving the whole self in recognition of a poem's "total meaning." Negative Capability, in Keats's words, occurs "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."⁶⁹ Keats's emphasis on "being in" as opposed to "reaching after" is an important distinction for Levertov who would not wish to dispense with one in favour of the other but would

⁶⁶ Levertov, "A Conversation," Sutton, Brooker, *Conversations*, 15.

⁶⁷ Levertov, "A Conversation," Sutton, Brooker, *Conversations*, 14-5.

⁶⁸ Levertov, "A Conversation," Sutton, Brooker, *Conversations*, 15.

⁶⁹ David Bromwich, "Negative Capability," *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*,

advocate a careful receptivity to both. Of course, problems arise when the "reaching after" takes over and obscures the sense of "being in" the reality. A potential danger of excessive "reaching after" is that an individual might tend to analyse her experience solely on the basis of how well it conforms to an imagined scheme. She would thus lose the capacity for "being in" experience and consequently might not learn acceptance of the "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts" that are part of experience. Mystery, in particular, holds a fascination for Levertov. She states that the "acknowledgement, and celebration, of mystery probably constitutes the most consistent theme of my poetry from its very beginnings."⁷⁰ As Levertov sees it, this "acknowledgement and celebration" is made possible by listening which requires an individual to embrace a balance between "reaching after" and "being in." Thus when a poem's "total meaning" is acknowledged the poem occurs to us, not only as intellectual understanding, but as an experience.

⁷⁰ Levertov, "A Poet's View," *NSE*, 246.

CHAPTER TWO

The Experience of Poetry

Any examination of the phrase "the experience of poetry" will require many detours. This chapter takes some of these detours and thereby offers a number of paths into the question of what it might mean to speak of the experience of Levertov's poetry. To be inspired when reading or writing a poem is to have a special kind of experience, one in which transcendence is often said to occur. I will consider several meanings of the term "transcendence," referring mainly to Hart, Heidegger and Levinas. In his exploration of the nature and meaning of poetry, Hart deals with the complex distinction in Heidegger's thought between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. I consider closely the differences and relations between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* and then proceed to compare the idea of transcendence in the works of Heidegger and Levinas. An understanding of experience and transcendence enables me to think philosophically about the connections in Levertov's poetry between ethics and aesthetics. For instance, the insights of Hart, Heidegger and Levinas have helped me to perceive that, in Levertov's poetry, transcendence does not constitute a departure from the world. Rather, it is an encounter in which the poet is exposed to what is usually outside her own experience. Poetry thereby also exposes others to the possibility of this encounter. It seems to me that Levertov aims for a transcendence that occurs as relationship. In place of a

subject-object distinction there is an event of relationship, a meeting of the poet's experience and what is simultaneously within and beyond it.

The separation I mentioned in the introduction between one's reality and an imagined reality is not, for Levertov, a separation that must be overcome. It is a space that does not close or, in other words, a relation between "being in" and "reaching after" that always occurs. To say that experiencing is merely "being in" is to neglect the fact that meaning will always be made or discovered along with experience. There is always some degree of separation within an experience since living and attempting to make sense of one's life go hand in hand. Hart describes this separation in temporal terms when he writes of a delay: "since consciousness is consequent on experience there will always be a delay in our thinking or speaking about experience."⁷¹ Levertov stresses something similar when she argues for the active cultivation of a commitment to listening. Such a commitment is an acknowledgement that one already has an intimate relationship with the surrounding world and that, nevertheless, there will always be "a delay in our thinking or speaking about experience." Consideration of possible ways of thinking about the word "experience" can move us closer to understanding what takes place in this relationship.

It is often assumed that since experience is familiar to everyone its meaning must be self-evident. An exploration of the work of various thinkers on "experience" helps to let go of the assumption that it need not be defined or interrogated. Hart, for example, asserts that

'experience,' especially when philosophy is in the air, can point to different areas. It can indicate a relatively stable state of affairs, as when one speaks in Kantian tones of establishing conditions of possibility for scientific experience. Or it can bespeak an adventure, a journey in which the concept itself will be harried or haunted. There can be no question of wholly

⁷¹ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 291.

eliminating these ambiguities from the expression 'the experience of poetry,' not only because they overlap but also because at different times and to varying extents they all impinge on the reading and writing of poetry.⁷²

Since "ambiguities" will always be a part of experience it is necessary to find ways of speaking about experience that acknowledge them, rather than explain or account for them as though they can be unraveled and sorted out once and for all. It is important, then, to consider these ambiguities with careful attention and to remain open to the question of how we might speak of experience to which they belong.

Erfahrung and Erlebnis

Relevant to this discussion of ambiguity and experience is Heidegger's distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, two German words for "experience." A footnote to *Being and Time* tells us that *Erlebnis* is an experience which "we feel deeply and 'live through'."⁷³ *Erfahrung* is, by contrast, not a lived experience but an event that is experienced independently of consciousness. John Martis clarifies this when he writes about the

point of distinction that has informed Western philosophy since Heidegger: that experience is *Erfahrung* (*pre-phenomenological*, corresponding a pre-intentional mental state, unconscious to the self-object distinction) before it is *Erlebnis* (*phenomenological*, framed in intentionality, mental representation, and consciousness of the self-object distinction.) The entire thought in *Being and Time* turns on this distinction, and a concomitant characterisation of human being as *Dasein*. *Dasein* is structured in and through a *pre-ontological* understanding of Being, and only derivatively from this as subject of an *ontological* understanding of Being.⁷⁴

⁷² Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 293.

⁷³ Macquarrie and Robinson, *Being and Time*, 72n1.

⁷⁴ John Martis, "Hyperbology and Loss: Representation and Subjectivity in the Writings of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe," diss., Monash U, 1999, 58-9.

This is not to say that *Erlebnis* is to be ignored. On the contrary, *Erlebnis* — “phenomenological, framed in intentionality, mental representation, and consciousness of the self-object distinction” — is what provides “the means of access to naming, reflecting or writing about experience as *Erfahrung*.”⁷⁵ Without *Erlebnis* there could be no sensible talk of “experience” and its possibilities. It must also be pointed out, however, that *Erlebnis* not only supports “intentionality,” “mental representation” and “consciousness” but it also facilitates the destabilisation of these things by virtue of its inevitability: *Erfahrung* always encounters, and even becomes, *Erlebnis*. Martis, in his study of subjectivity in Lacoue-Labarthe’s thinking, highlights with great insight the disruptive action of *Erlebnis* upon the representation of a subject’s experience: “*Erfahrung* which, when one comes to think, speak, or write of it, becomes inescapably cast as *Erlebnis*, and is thereby ‘undone,’ together with its ‘subject.’”⁷⁶ In an argument that can be seen as analogous with the one Blanchot makes regarding language as both exemplifying and defying representation, Lacoue-Labarthe views experience as involving both subjectivity and that which precedes it. Martis wonders “what status might be accorded the passage to *Erlebnis*, or, obversely, of ‘what’ *Erfahrung* might be before it is given name and form.”⁷⁷ This question addresses the unknown in experience and implicitly acknowledges that what comes before *Erlebnis* is also that which is beyond it.

Given that *Erlebnis* has a destabilising effect upon *Erfahrung* it is worth pausing to give some attention to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s tracing of

⁷⁵ Martis, “Hyperbology and Loss,” 59.

⁷⁶ Martis, “Hyperbology and Loss,” 60.

⁷⁷ Martis, “Hyperbology and Loss,” 60.

the word *Erlebnis* back to the verb *erleben*.⁷⁸ Gadamer points out that within *Erlebnis* a couple of meanings are at play: one is the “permanent content of what is experienced” or the “discovered yield, its lasting result” and the other is “the immediacy, which precedes all interpretation, reworking, and communication, and merely offers a starting point for interpretation — material to be shaped.”⁷⁹ Due to the simultaneity of these meanings, *Erlebnis* can be understood as an inevitable impasse involving both “result” and “immediacy” at once. Gadamer attests to this when he states that *Erlebnis* “means something unforgettable and irreplaceable, something whose meaning cannot be exhausted by conceptual determination.”⁸⁰ The “something” he mentions hints not only at what cannot be contained by concepts but also at his notion of infinity. In a discussion of the use of the concept of life (*Leben*) as a way of criticising Enlightenment rationalism, Gadamer highlights that “[i]n contrast to the abstractness of understanding and the particularity of perception or representation, this concept implies a connection with totality, with infinity. This is clearly audible in the tone that the word *Erlebnis* has even today.”⁸¹ Perhaps the most telling of Gadamer’s sentences regarding experience and infinity is “[e]rleben means primarily ‘to be still alive

⁷⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 61.

⁷⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 61. Gadamer writes that “Erleben means primarily ‘to be still alive when something happens.’ Thus the word suggests the immediacy with which something real is grasped — unlike something which one presumes to know but which is unattested by one’s own experience, whether because it is taken over from others or comes from heresy, or whether it is inferred, surmised, or imagined. What is experienced is always what one has experienced oneself . . . But at the same time the form ‘das Erlebte’ is used to mean the permanent content of what is experienced. This content is like a yield or result that achieves permanence, weight, and significance from out of the transience of experiencing. Both meanings obviously lie behind the coinage of *Erlebnis*: both the immediacy, which precedes all interpretation, reworking, and communication, and merely offers a starting point for interpretation — material to be shaped — and its discovered yield, its lasting result.”

⁸⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 67.

⁸¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 63.

when something happens.’”⁸² This resonates with Hart’s mention of peril or danger entailed in experience. The subject survives, and may testify to an experience, even in the face of such peril. This persistence is evidence of the simultaneity of both the “permanence” and “transience” of experience: something is always “still alive.”

Gadamer’s probing of the word *Erlebnis* seems to originate from the same desire that Martis demonstrates when he wishes to know “what status might be accorded the passage to *Erlebnis*, or, obversely, of ‘what’ *Erfahrung* might be before it is given name and form.”⁸³ That something is still alive after an event is perhaps due not so much to its status as remnant but to its persistence even before experience takes place. Gadamer’s notion of “infinity” suggests that conceptual understanding of both *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* must at some point give way to an acknowledgement of something irreducible that occurs in experience as “immediacy, which precedes all interpretation, reworking, and communication.”

I am reminded of Louise Glück’s observation that “[t]he unknowable is the poem’s first referent, the context.”⁸⁴ Glück comments that Rilke’s poem, “Archaic Torso of Apollo”⁸⁵ “begins with the unknowable, a void located in the past. And ends with the unknown: a new, a different, life; a void projected into the future . . . the force of the imperative is abrupt, like breakage; the swerving assaults us, implicates, challenges.”⁸⁶ It is possible to imagine *Erfahrung* as “the unknowable, a void located in the past” that is always “projected into the future.” As

⁸² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 61.

⁸³ Martis, “Hyperbology and Loss,” 60.

⁸⁴ Louise Glück, *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1994) 75.

⁸⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poetry*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1989) 61.

Glück sees it, the passage from the "void" to "a new, a different, life; a void projected into the future" is one that involves not only words but life itself. This transformation, which can be thought of as the passage from *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis*, is something we cannot stand back from: the passage from *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis* always already "assaults us, implicates, challenges." Hart makes this point in a talk entitled "The Experience of God": "In general, it is the 'I' in its relation with the non-I that constitutes experience, but in their highest experiences the great mystics report that the 'I' has been shattered, suspended, or dissolved. Here, then, would be an experience, if we can still call it that, which overwhelms the subject to the point of calling subjectivity into question."⁸⁷ In the same way the journey through Rilke's poetry "assaults," "implicates" and "challenges" us, the experience of the mystics has the effect of rendering the subject "shattered, suspended, or dissolved."

Recalling Levertov's poem, "Suspended" it becomes clearer now that the lines, "I had grasped God's garment in the void / but my hand slipped / on the rich silk of it" are a nightmare for the subject since the subject itself, rather than God, is being put into question. Hart qualifies the word "experience" when he says, "here, then, would be an experience, if we can still call it that." His comment draws attention to the fact that "experience" is often thought of as something that the "I" not only survives but in fact controls. Hart's reexamination of what happens to the "I," and whether this can still be called an experience, opens up possibilities for a new approach that removes the reins from the hands of the subject and leaves them floating, like "God's garment," in the air. It is not just that

⁸⁶ Glück, *Proofs and Theories*, 75.

⁸⁷ Hart, "The Experience of God," *Encounter*, Radio National, 18 June, 2000. Online transcript. Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Internet. 22 June, 2000. Available <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/enc/stories/s138228/htm>

experience involves a degree of risk for a subject, but that experience itself is risk. Hart writes about the complexity of the word "experience" in the light of the Heideggerian distinction and the Latin root *experiri*:

The English word 'experience' wanders between and around *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, a distinction with various functions in German but which always alerts us to a sense of experience as directed inward ('lived experience') and another sense which preserves the Latin *experiri*, 'to test' or 'to try' (and within that, *peiri*, from which we get 'peril'), and which keeps in play a notion of experience as a setting at risk, a voyage that may well involve danger.⁸⁸

It should be clear by now that while *Erfahrung* precedes and exceeds *Erlebnis* the two are in no way exclusive. All experience is both "lived experience" and "a setting at risk, a voyage that may well involve danger." If this is the case I wonder how we can begin to speak of the experience of poetry. My hunch is that poetry is evidence of the untraceable and continuous interaction of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, and that poetry provides the opportunity to witness this intimate, uneasy relationship. As well as discussing poetry as an experience that someone undergoes, I want to explore ways in which poetry itself undergoes an experience. Following Hart, I will do this by first considering the grammar involved in descriptions of experience.

Hart draws attention to the English grammar involved in the phrase "the experience of God." The phrase is "governed by the objective as well as the subjective genitive. We think first of all of the subjective: our human problems of experiencing or not experiencing God, of the logical perplexities of how a limited being could experience the infinite. But then the expression invites us to consider what God experiences . . . [s]o let us begin by pondering what God experiences."⁸⁹ The same can be said for the

⁸⁸ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 293.

⁸⁹ Hart, "The Experience of God," *Encounter*.

phrase "the experience of poetry." I will begin with what poetry experiences, as Hart begins with what God experiences, but I would like to pause for a moment to consider not only the relation between experience and poetry but the possible *relationship* between them. The word "relationship" implies a greater degree of emotion than is evoked by the word "relation." There is overlap in the meaning of the two words — "relationship" is "the state or condition of being in relation" — but there is also an important difference: while "relation" is a connection, it can be a connection of people or things through circumstance or through feeling, whereas the emphasis of "relationship" is most commonly upon a state of relatedness that involves a connection that is specifically emotional.⁹⁰ This appears to add another dimension to the objective and subjective emphasis of the phrase "the experience of poetry." It seems that both the experiencing subject and the experiencing poetry are not only positioned in relation to one another, they are involved in a relationship of intellectual and emotional significance.⁹¹

Levertov writes about the importance of emotion when she extends Gerard Manley Hopkins's idea of "inscape" and "instress" to include "intellectual and emotional experience":

⁹⁰ "Relation" and "Relationship," *OED*. Philosophy makes a further distinction between internal and external relations. An internal relation is a correspondence of properties between two terms, and an external relation is a correspondence of two terms that is not concerned with properties. It could be argued that the above "state of relatedness that involves a connection that is specifically emotional" is both an internal and an external relation since poetry and experience may well be related by essential properties that include relations to other things.

⁹¹ Despite the fact that poets have always declared emotion to be central to poetry, the philosophers and literary critics appear to have left the subject of emotion to psychoanalysts and psychologists. This creates a problem for a literature scholar, such as myself, looking for thinkers who embrace emotion as much as they embrace topics such as formal structures of language, and subjectivity. There is, of course, a tradition of psychoanalytic thought that combines the study of literature with the study of human psychology. Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray are the main contributors to this area since Sigmund Freud, and they continue to be influential in the criticism of literary texts. Although I have read these thinkers with curiosity, I will not discuss their works at length.

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.⁹²

Levertov perceives in poetry a combination of "sensory," "intellectual" and "emotional" experience. Of these it is emotion that connects her experience of poetry with her spiritual experience. Her understanding of "the inscape of an experience...or of the inscape of a sequence or constellation of experiences" is arrived at through an acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of the various aspects of her experience. For Levertov, "inscape" means something like the "total meaning" discussed in Chapter One. To have access to the inscape of an experience is to experience total meaning, that is, to be capable of "being in" an experience. Levertov's belief that writing and reading poetry require an awareness of inscape or total meaning is indicated by her emphasis upon listening, contemplation and meditation.⁹³

A poet must learn "to contemplate, to meditate" and thus enter "a state in which the heat of feeling warms the intellect."⁹⁴ Levertov writes about the connections between contemplation, meditation and spiritual experience in a passage that deals with how each of these is involved in the writing of poetry:

To contemplate comes from '*templum*, a temple, a place, a space for observation, marked out by the augur.' It means, not

⁹² Levertov, "Some Notes on Organic Form," 1965, *NSE*, 67.

⁹³ Levertov, "Organic Form," *NSE*, 68.

⁹⁴ Levertov, "Organic Form," *NSE*, 68.

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.⁹⁵

For Levertov, contemplation "means, not simply to observe, to regard, but to do these things in the presence of a god" and meditation is the mental discipline of maintaining such activity. The word "muse," frequently used in a general sense in relation to poetry, is here seen as synonymous with "meditate." Meditation enables inspiration to occur. The resulting poetry sustains the poet's relationship with God.⁹⁶ The conditions that enable an experience of poetry are also those which enable an experience of God.

Levertov further describes this state of contemplation by emphasizing the "communion" or "intuitive interaction" between elements within the poet's experience:

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.⁹⁷

In this passage "all the elements involved" are overshadowed by the actual event of their coming together. The words "communion," "interrelate," and "interaction," indicate Levertov's interest in the event of writing as well as the study of the various elements necessary to it. I too am interested in writing as an event and particularly in experience as it occurs in Levertov's poetry. I want to look more closely at what takes place in the "communion" described above.

⁹⁵ Levertov, "Organic Form," *NSE*, 68.

⁹⁶ Hart connects and compares the experience of God with the experience of breathing: he makes the point that although we cannot be in the presence of God, "[h]e is closer to us than our own breathing." See Hart, "The Experience of God," *Encounter*.

⁹⁷ Levertov, "Organic Form," *NSE*, 69.

Levertov's use of the word "communion" draws attention to the degree of involvement required by a poet and the richness of the poet's experience of writing poetry. "Communion" has a variety of definitions, including "[s]haring or holding in common with others; participation; the condition of things so held, community, combination, union," "[f]ellowship, association in action or relations; mutual intercourse" and "[c]ommunity or association of functions, common relation [of things]."⁹⁸ John Zizioulas writes about the various Christian approaches to "communion" and distinguishes between "communion" and "participation." He writes that "participation is used only for creatures in their relation with God, and never for God in his relation to creation . . . [i]f we consider what this distinction entails for the idea of truth, our conclusion has to be: the truth of creation is a *dependent* truth, while the truth of God's being is *communion* in itself."⁹⁹ According to this view, things in the world take part in truth, that is, they know truth in "communion by participation" while God is truth as "communion without participation."¹⁰⁰ Zizioulas perceives communion as an event in which otherness is discovered in the relationship between humans and God. His notion of otherness arises from his belief that Christ "cannot be conceived in Himself as an individual" but as a "whole personal existence" consisting of "His relationship with His body, the Church, ourselves."¹⁰¹ Christ cannot be approached as a single entity. Humans are implicated in this impossibility too since their participation in communion alters their relationship with the surrounding world: "The individualization of existence by the fall makes us seek out security in objects or various

⁹⁸ "Communion," *OED*.

⁹⁹ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary, 1985) 94.

¹⁰⁰ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 94.

'things,' but the truth of communion does not offer this kind of security: rather, it frees us from slavery to objective 'things' by placing all things and ourselves within a communion-event. It is there that the Spirit is simultaneously freedom and communion."¹⁰² In the relationship between Christ and the individual, "slavery to objective 'things'" is replaced by an encounter with "the possibility of otherness within communion."¹⁰³ The emphasis is upon experiencing communion as opposed to knowing its definitions.

While Levertov does not define communion in a technical sense she does state that it "is not a matter of one element supervising the others but of intuitive interaction between all the elements involved." Communion during the writing of poetry is not a matter of arrangement or manipulation but a relationship between "all the elements involved." Since there is no individual controlling this relationship and the elements involved are innumerable and shifting it is impossible to speak of it as though it were a simple relation of objects or known quantities. Attempts to define the poet's experience of relationship or communion will always meet with resistance. The following discussion of "experience" and "transcendence" will shed some light on why this is so.

Hart's thinking on "experience," in conjunction with some insights from the work of Heidegger, has enabled me to think about experience in Levertov's poems as an event of relationship that is characterised by both intimacy and estrangement. In Levertov's poetry relationship can be seen as arising out of what Hart calls "a division in experience itself." Hart intends to "preserve the word 'experience' while resetting the concept so

¹⁰¹ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 110.

¹⁰² Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 122.

¹⁰³ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 121.

that it does not presume a fusion of subject and object."¹⁰⁴ This has particular significance when it comes to finding ways of viewing Levertov's relationship with God. Hart points out that "[s]ince Kant many poets and critics have believed they have crossed a bridge from nature to freedom; and maybe they have, though I suspect they have been walking in circles. My sense of the situation is that we are right to posit a gap, but that it does not fall between experience and something else but in experience itself."¹⁰⁵ As I see it, in Levertov's poetry there is no fusion of subject and object. Nor is there an empty space where the fusion might have been. There is a space, or a "gap," that is bristling with connections; an abundant, active site of relationship. The structured theoretical model of a separation between subject and object is refigured as a space of relationship that is an event rather than a structure. Given Hart's assertion that between nature and freedom there is no bridge to cross, only a circle that we can trace, it is possible to envisage in Levertov's poetry experience that includes transcendence.

With regard to poetry, Archibald MacLeish writes about poems which occur as relationship. He discusses the work of an ancient Chinese poet Lu Chi who wrote in a form called a Fu (a kind of extended prose poem) about the art of poetry. MacLeish asserts that

[a] poem begins, in the Wen Fu, not in isolation but in relationship. There is the writer here. And over there, there is 'the mystery of the universe' — the 'four seasons' — 'the myriad objects' — 'the complexity of the world.' Instead of the symbol arising like Venus of her own motion from the sea there is an image, poem, achieved in the space *between* — that space we all look out on — the space between ourselves on the one side and the world on the other.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 291.

¹⁰⁵ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 289.

¹⁰⁶ Archibald MacLeish, *Poetry and Experience* (London: Bodley, 1960) 6.

MacLeish tries to find ways of speaking about a transcendence that occurs within experience and chooses to write about emotion. In his reading of Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" he emphasises the involvement of emotion in effective reading:

This 'good night' is neither 'good' nor 'night' nor yet a simple saying of farewell but all of them together and much more than all. Emotion *knows* the difference even though mind is defeated in its busy effort to pinch the difference between the thumb and finger of reason and so dispose of it. Emotion — and this is perhaps the point precisely — cannot dispose of it. Emotion stands there staring.¹⁰⁷

There is an implicit distinction here between feeling and thinking. Feeling is privileged as being more intimate with experience. Marcel also draws a distinction between feeling and thinking, not in order to privilege one over the other but to draw attention to their equal involvement in experience. He declares that "the urgent inner need for transcendence should never be interpreted as a need to pass beyond all experience whatsoever; for beyond all experience, there is nothing. I do not say merely nothing that can be thought, but nothing that can be felt."¹⁰⁸ An acknowledgement of what is "felt" and the emotion in poetry is closely linked with the activity of desire. In Chapter Five I will discuss the role that desire plays in this "urgent inner need for transcendence." As Michael Palmer remarks "desire is pretty abstract until you feel it."¹⁰⁹ However, in order to connect the ideas of transcendence and desire it is necessary to further clarify what transcendence might mean in relation to poetry.

¹⁰⁷ MacLeish, *Poetry and Experience*, 12.

¹⁰⁸ Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, 47-8.

¹⁰⁹ Michael Palmer, *Exact Change Yearbook No 1*, ed. Peter Gizzi (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995) 166.

Transcendence: Heidegger

Transcendence has been a major area of inquiry for Western philosophy since Plato. In order to place Levertov in the context of this philosophical history I will explore her ideas about transcendence within a broader discussion of transcendence as it is examined by Heidegger and Levinas. This discussion will also be punctuated with references to the work of Blanchot and Derrida each of whom is influenced significantly by Heidegger and Levinas.

Heidegger investigates the various meanings of "transcendence," pointing out that the Latin "*transcendere*" means "to surpass, step over, to cross over to. Thus *transcendence* means the surpassing, the going beyond."¹¹⁰ However, he also writes that "[t]o transcend is to be-in-the-world."¹¹¹ These statements can be understood together if we look at what Heidegger means by "world." He clarifies his use of the word by referring back to its Greek equivalent *κόσμος* which means a "condition," a "mode of being."¹¹² Heidegger identifies the event of transcendence as the primary mode of being of entities. In the case of the human subject, for example, he asserts that "[t]ranscendence is rather the primordial constitution of the *subjectivity* of a subject. The subject transcends qua subject; it would not be a subject if it did not transcend. To be a subject means to transcend."¹¹³ Transcendence appears to precede entities so that, as "primordial constitution," it determines their mode of being or their "world." A subject is always a transcendent subject before it is a subject. Transcendence cannot be thought of as a passage from a finite, inner realm to an infinite, outer realm. Rather, Heidegger's transcendence has always

¹¹⁰ Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) 160.

¹¹¹ Heidegger, *Metaphysical Foundations*, 212.

¹¹² Heidegger, *Metaphysical Foundations*, 171.

already occurred and entities are the traces of this event. As Gabriel Motzkin explains,

[t]he individuation of an entity . . . can only take place retrospectively; that is, the entity can only be identified after it has already been encountered, and therefore each identification is in reality a reidentification, for no entity can be encountered outside of its contextual determination. Transcending then means the surpassing of an entity or object that is encountered in the same world to which I belong.¹¹⁴

The gap in between the encounter and the identification is a gap of retrospection, a looking back to what has already occurred within the entity being individuated. Given that "no entity can be encountered outside of its contextual determination," identification necessarily involves "transcending," or "the surpassing of an entity or object that is encountered in the same world to which I belong." Heidegger's examination of the space in which this impossible simultaneous movement occurs can be viewed in light of his thoughts regarding *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. Sooner or later *Erfahrung* becomes *Erlebnis* which is bound up with identification. Far from being erased in identification, however, *Erfahrung* is always already part of *Erlebnis*. Its persistence raises the question of what is before and beyond *Erlebnis*. While transcendence is "the surpassing of an entity or object," the encounter of the entity or object is by no means forgotten. Rather, it is preserved in transcendence as the unknown that is before and beyond identification.

¹¹³ Heidegger, *Metaphysical Foundations*, 165.

¹¹⁴ Gabriel Motzkin, "Heidegger's Transcendent Nothing," *Languages of the Unsayable*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987) 102.

Transcendence: Levinas

The influence of Heidegger upon Levinas can be seen in the approaches of the two thinkers towards the question of transcendence. While Levinas agrees with Heidegger's definition of transcendence as "the primordial constitution" of entities and "a basic phenomenon" of experience, he wishes to take Heidegger's thinking in the direction of ethics. Levinas aims for an ethics which does not belong to the tradition of ontology, that is, the conceptualization of being. He views philosophy as being fundamentally an ethics rather than an ontology. He consequently attempts to refigure Heidegger's transcendental separation between meaning and being as a "distance" which makes ethical demands on the subject. In place of Heidegger's emphasis upon the event of understanding (which can be understood or thought within Heidegger's ontological framework) Levinas stresses that the other cannot be thought but only faced.

A subject faces the other because of the responsibility he has for the other. The "distance" of which Levinas writes is the distance of the subject's approach towards the other. Transcendence occurs then as a movement across this distance:

The irreversibility of the relation [between subject and other] can be produced only if the relation is effected by one of the terms as the very movement of transcendence, as the *traversing* of this distance, and not as a recording of, or the psychological invention of this movement.¹¹⁵

As Levinas sees it, the "term" that does the "traversing" is the subject. He writes that "[w]e know this relation only in the measure that we effect it . . . [a]lterity is possible only starting from *me*."¹¹⁶ To be facing, then, is to be

¹¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985) 39-40.

¹¹⁶ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 40.

in a dynamic relationship. It is to approach other beings whilst letting them be in their remoteness. For a subject to exist is, for Levinas, "to be facing"¹¹⁷ the other in an irreversible relation. The relation that a subject may have with God, for example, occurs as a relationship in which the subject never reaches but always faces God: "The term 'transcendence' signifies precisely the fact that one cannot think God and being together. So too in the interpersonal relationship it is not a matter of thinking the ego and the other together, but to be facing. The true union or true togetherness is not a togetherness of synthesis, but a togetherness of face to face."¹¹⁸ Whether the subject is in relationship with God or another person, the relationship occurs in the context of "radical heterogeneity."¹¹⁹ Departing from Heidegger's notion of transcendence occurring within understanding, Levinas perceives that

[t]he absolute gap of separation which transcendence implies could not be better expressed than by the term creation, in which the kinship of beings among themselves is affirmed, but at the same time their radical heterogeneity also, their reciprocal exteriority coming from nothingness. One may speak of creation to characterize entities situated in the transcendence that does not close over into a totality.¹²⁰

The word "creation" gestures towards "the absolute gap of separation which transcendence implies" by encompassing "the kinship of beings" as well as "their radical heterogeneity . . . their reciprocal exteriority coming from nothingness." Clearly a subject's relationship with the world is not a simple relationship characterized by distinct borders and measurable interactions. Better than a subject-object model is an approach that acknowledges the space or "distance" in which relationship is always being renewed. The difference between the two models is vast, and perhaps it

¹¹⁷ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 77.

¹¹⁸ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 77.

¹¹⁹ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 293.

can be likened to the difference between an intimate relationship which is considered to be “over” and an intimate relationship that is current. The past relationship and the past partner have been ascribed meanings. It is said to be “over” and the current relationship is privileged as having the most possibilities, the one characterized by a “transcendence that does not close over into a totality.”¹²¹

Levinas would view the ascription of meaning to the past relationship as an attempt to do the impossible, that is, to limit the relationship to the Said, that is, to the realm of identification. He points out that even the most determined efforts to reduce something to the Said will meet with resistance and that Saying always persists in the Said. Davis highlights Levinas’s belief that “underlying, though not fully represented by, every utterance is a situation, structure or event in which I am exposed to the Other as a speaker or receiver of discourse. The Said presupposes Saying, which is thus, in Levinas’s term, pre-original: it does not chronologically precede the Said, but it has priority over it because it constitutes its condition of possibility.”¹²² The notion of Saying as a condition of possibility for the Said is important in Levinas’s broader argument for a philosophy concerned primarily with ethics. Levinas contrasts morality and ethics:

Morality is what governs the world of political ‘interestedness,’ the social interchanges between citizens in a society. Ethics, as the extreme exposure and sensitivity of one subjectivity to another, becomes morality and hardens its skin as soon as we move into the political world of the impersonal ‘third’ — the world of government, institutions, tribunals, prisons, schools, committees, etc. But the norm which must continue to inspire

¹²⁰ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 293.

¹²¹ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 293.

¹²² Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996) 75.

and direct the moral order is the ethical norm of the interhuman.¹²³

The phrase "the extreme exposure and sensitivity of one subjectivity to another" is what Levinas is getting at when he affirms the importance of "the ethical norm of the interhuman." For Levinas, ethics is "a form of vigilant passivity to the call of the other which precedes our interest in Being."¹²⁴ Acknowledging pre-ontological Saying then is an ethical gesture. Childlike sincerity is an analogy used by Levinas to try to capture the vulnerability in which Saying occurs.¹²⁵ In Saying the subject witnesses the movement from the Said to Saying, and consequently the break-up of the Said. This break-up is transcendence which, for Levinas, is witnessed by a subject in relationship with what the subject cannot encompass. Levinas claims that the subject's relationship with otherness is what constitutes its subjectivity. Thus transcendence is a built-in feature of the subject's experience.

Adriaan Peperzak summarizes Levinas's vision of transcendence that occurs from moment to moment in the plainest of circumstances:

Transcendence is no longer the ascent to a heaven of the ideal or the sublime but the humble endurance of everyday life, touched, affected, burdened, wounded, obsessed, and exhausted. A human subject is an inspired body. It is moved by a breath that comes from an immemorial past. As respiration between this inspiration and the expiration of tiredness, old age, and death, a human life is breathing for others.¹²⁶

¹²³ Levinas, "Ethics of the Infinite," *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers*, ed. Richard Kearney (New York: New York UP, 1995) 194-5.

¹²⁴ Levinas, "Ethics of the Infinite," 194.

¹²⁵ Levinas writes, "[t]he child is a pure exposure of expression in so far as it is pure vulnerability; it has not yet learned to dissemble, to deceive, to be insincere." See Levinas, "Ethics of the Infinite," 194.

¹²⁶ Adriaan Peperzak, "Transcendence," *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995) 191.

The origin of ethical activity is this "breath" or "respiration," a movement of one for the other. This movement of saying that occurs in "the humble endurance of everyday life" can be connected with Levinas's notion of "poetry." Hart points out that Levinas distrusts both poetry and religion because of the tendency he perceives in them to involve the emotions on their path to the supernatural.¹²⁷ However, Hart also highlights that elsewhere Levinas writes about poetry and means not a form of writing but specifically "that which disturbs representation."¹²⁸ Hart writes that poetry, for Levinas, is "co-ordinate with transcendence, as understood ethically rather than religiously. Or to say the same thing in slightly different words, poetry interrupts art."¹²⁹ Poetry, like experience, stalls efforts to represent it.

While Levertov would disagree strongly with Levinas's warnings about the genre of poetry, she agrees with Levinas to the extent that transcendence is fundamentally ethical rather than aesthetic. In a discussion of the similarities between prophecy and poetry, Levertov writes about the transformations that poetry can make possible within those who come into contact with it:

prophetic utterance, like poetic utterance, transforms experience and moves the receiver to new attitudes. The kinds of experience — the recognitions or revelations — out of which both prophecy and poetry emerge, are such as to stir the prophet or poet to speech that may exceed their own capacities: they are 'inspired', they breathe in revelation and breathe out new words; and by so doing they transfer over to the listener or reader a parallel experience, a parallel intensity, which impels that person into new attitudes and new actions. Of course, this doesn't necessarily happen instantly. Some listeners are impervious, others are changed so subtly by a poem or by a prophet's words that a long time elapses between cause and

¹²⁷ Hart, "Emmanuel Levinas," essay forthcoming in Julian Wolfrey, ed., *The Columbia Encyclopedia of Post War Literary Criticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002). The observation above can be found on page 12 of the unpublished manuscript.

¹²⁸ Hart, "Emmanuel Levinas," 15.

¹²⁹ Hart, "Emmanuel Levinas," 15.

effect. But fast or slow, if the prophecy or the poem is the mysterious genuine article and the receiver's sensibility is open to it, some change does take place, I am convinced. It is for this reason that I've always felt poetry and the other arts had a potential for contributing to social change no matter how remote from political, social, current or ethical issues they may seem to be. They don't bring about change in themselves, but they can contribute to it simply by stimulating the imagination and thus making empathy and compassion more *possible*, at least.¹³⁰

When the imagination is stimulated, change is made possible. Poetry reveals the possibility for individuals to "exceed their own capacities," to practise "new attitudes and new actions" and to realise "empathy and compassion." Poetry exposes us to the possibility that we are not bound by the limits that we think of as our selves. It allows us to experience our particularity as subjects as well as connect with a world of possibility.

According to Levertov, the poet's relationship with the world is sustained in poetic vision. The language in which this vision occurs is a language that represents, or mirrors, the world while transforming it. Levertov compares poetry with the mirror that Perseus uses to view Medusa and thereby avoid being turned to stone:

The fact that Perseus managed to get close enough to sever her [Medusa's] neck without himself being turned to stone, by the ruse of focussing on her mirror image — that mirror being indeed his shield — seems to suggest the way in which art provides a mode of perceiving evil and terror without being immobilized, but on the contrary enabled to come to grips with them.¹³¹

This refraction metaphor indicates Levertov's view of poetry as a "shield" that allows us "to come to grips with" something. Given poetry's dual responsibility, that is, exposing and protecting, it is useful to consider Blanchot's suggestion that art allows us to come to grips with the

¹³⁰ Levertov, "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," *NSE*, 148-9.

possibility of our own destruction. Art exposes the possibility of annihilation, while never actually annihilating anyone.¹³² Levertov would agree with this proposition since she believes that poetic vision exposes us to and protects us from possibilities. For example, she observes that "the experience of poetry provides, like the mirror of Perseus, a means for human consciousness to transcend the linear and by fitful glimpses, at least, to attain a vision of ultimate harmony, of reconciliation, not exclusion nor dilution."¹³³ As already stated, Levertov's use of the word "transcend" does not imply escape from the world. Her "vision of ultimate harmony, of reconciliation" occurs in the world and involves a transcendence that is a transformation rather than an escape from the world:

Transformation! Yes, that is probably the key word. *To spew forth* is not to transform; neither is *to state*. Both actions are of use; both may be necessary under certain circumstances. Both may be included in the process of making a work of art. But works of art transcend these and other factors, *transforming* them, along with the raw material of experience (factual or emotional) into autonomous creations that give off mysterious energy.¹³⁴

To say that poems are "autonomous creations" is not to say that they exist in a realm separate from other things. A poem's autonomy is what enables it to act in the world. Such action is crucial in Levertov's poetics. Autonomy, then, is never synonymous with separation. Rather, it is an entering into, more deeply and fully. As Levertov puts it,

[i]t was by striking his sharp hoof hard upon the rocky earth that Pegasus released the fountain of Hippocrene, the fountain of poetic inspiration henceforth sacred to the Muses. (Some

¹³¹ Levertov, "Horses with Wings," 1984, *NSE*, 110. This essay also appears in Hank Lazer, *What Is a Poet? Essays from the Eleventh Alabama Symposium on English and American Literature* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1987) 124-34.

¹³² See Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," *The Work of Fire* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995) 300-44.

¹³³ Levertov, "Horses with Wings," *NSE*, 110-1.

¹³⁴ Levertov, "Talking to Doctors," mid-1970s, *LUC*, 91.

say, too, that it was not until the moment that Medusa's blood, spurting from her neck, *touched earth* that he became manifest). Poet and poem must strike hard and sink deep into the material to tap spiritual springs or give new birth to 'the winged fountain.'¹³⁵

From this potent testimony to the necessity of knowing "the rocky earth," of having "*touched earth*," and Levertov's advice to "strike hard and sink deep into the material," it is clear that Levertov never strives to view the world from above or outside it. This includes language. As Hart explains, "trans-ascendence is the greatest possible risk for a poet. To transcend the world is to leave language behind. In ecstasy one does not encounter the silence that gives words their contours and weights but the silence that dissolves words. Better to transcend transcendence."¹³⁶ This is precisely the kind of transcendence Levertov's poetry embodies. It is not that her poetry does not transcend: rather, her poems transcend within the event of transformation.

In her comparison of the process of creating poetry with the flight of Pegasus Levertov is quick to point out that

[s]uch flights are not to be equaled with abstraction, as may too easily be done if one assumes that the earthy horse represents the concrete and the wings the abstract. Pegasus as horse does indeed present the sensual, the sensuous, the concretely specific, but that physicality is itself related to the unconscious — and not only to the instinctive but to the intuitive as well. And his wings, which do not deform but increase and enhance his equine characteristics of speed and strength of motion, express not the abstractions of linear intellection but the transcendent and transformative power of Imagination itself.¹³⁷

Levertov's poetry affirms that this world is the only place to be. To dismiss poetry as "abstract" is to forego its "sensual," "sensuous,"

¹³⁵ Levertov, "Horses with Wings," *NSE*, 112.

¹³⁶ Hart, "'La Poesia è Scala a Dio:' On Reading Charles Wright," *Heat* 6 (1997-8) 107. Hart uses Wahl's word "trans-ascendence" from *Existence humaine et transcendance* (Neuchâtel, 1944) 113.

¹³⁷ Levertov, "Horses with Wings," *NSE*, 113.

“concrete specific,” “instinctive” and “intuitive” richness. Instead of feeling claustrophobic about belonging to this world and no other, Levertov sees and celebrates its infinite possibilities. Here I am reminded of Ben Okri’s advice to poets: “Poet, be like the tortoise: bear the shell of the world and still manage to sing your transforming dithyrambs woven from our blood, our pain, our loves, our history, our joy. The lonely and inescapable truth simply is that this is the only kingdom you will ever have. This is the home of your song.”¹³⁸ For Okri, the fact that “this is the only kingdom you will ever have” is “lonely and inescapable” but is also an affirmation of the preciousness of his, and our, “home.” Within this world the possibilities for singing are both limited and unlimited. For Okri and Levertov, poetry transcends imaginatively by revealing the world’s possibilities. The world is thus transformed and made impossibly other. Poetry takes place on the brink of this otherness.

Before I look at Levertov’s use of the word “transcend” I wish to attend to the distinction noted by Hart between theories of vertical and horizontal transcendence in relation to poetry:

One group affirms transcendence by way of the vertical. ‘Poetry is an illumination of the heights,’ they say, ‘it may disclose the meaning of being, reveal there is no meaning to being, or in questing beyond the world may undermine itself by disparaging language.’ Another group figures transcendence as horizontal movement: poetry leads to places we never knew, and in doing so changes the author.¹³⁹

A poetry that “leads to places we never knew” is what interests Levertov. For her, poetry “changes the author” as well as those with whom it communicates. This transformative power of poetry is what makes it an ethical force for Levertov. I want to return for a moment to Hart’s earlier

¹³⁸ Ben Okri, “While the World Sleeps,” 1988, *A Way of Being Free* (London: Phoenix, 1997) 15.

¹³⁹ Hart, “Experience and Transcendence,” *Cordite* 4 (1998): 10.

statement that critics who believe that “they have crossed a bridge from nature to freedom” have probably “been walking in circles.” It is encouraging to know that if we are to trace these “circles” we are not necessarily treading the same ground over and over. Our steps do not explore what we are but what we encounter, and this changes all the time. Likewise, in his discussion of poetry and experience, Hart is concerned not so much with what poetry is as with “what poetry encounters.”¹⁴⁰ Clearly, “what poetry encounters” is neither knowledge nor an object, but something else: as Hart writes, “[r]eading or writing poetry suspends naïve attitudes to meaning and reference without abolishing either ‘meaning’ or ‘reference.’ The great power of rhythmic language is to cancel our sense of security in a posited world and to lead consciousness to a state of fascination.”¹⁴¹ But what is it exactly that “poetry encounters”? A preliminary answer to this question might recall Levinas’s assertion that transcendence involves a subject’s encounter with what cannot be encompassed by conscious thought. This would be the distance of the subject’s approach to the other. In Levertov’s poetics, if we try to find what poetry encounters, we do not find anything but an in-between space. As Hart comments, such a space “does not fall between experience and something else but in experience itself.”¹⁴² Levertov offers a clue to what characterizes the space when she writes of art as a mediator. It is worth pursuing this idea in order to attempt a clearer understanding of how an experience of poetry can take place.

In her essay “Paradox and Equilibrium” Levertov writes about art as a mediator between “our destructive potential” and “our constructive,

¹⁴⁰ Hart, “The Experience of Poetry,” 286.

¹⁴¹ Hart, “The Experience of Poetry,” 287.

¹⁴² Hart, “The Experience of Poetry,” 289.

potential." Poetry thus plays a crucial role in developing and heightening an awareness of the historical and political context in which one lives:

We humans cannot absorb the bitter truths of our own history, the revelation of our destructive potential, *except* through the mediation of art (the manifestation of our other, our constructive, potential). Presented raw, the facts are rejected: perhaps not by the intellect, which accommodates them as statistics, but by the emotions — which hold the key to conscience and resolve. We numb ourselves, evading the vile taste, the stench. But whether neutralized into statistics or encountered head-on without an artist-guide (as if Dante wandered through Hell without a Vergil), the facts poison us unless we can find a way both to acknowledge their reality with our whole selves and, accepting it, muster the will to transcend it.¹⁴³

I am particularly interested in Levertov's notion of mediation since it gives a clue to how she thinks of transcendence as an event of transformation. Art, for Levertov, is the only way for people to realise the historical context in which they live: "We humans cannot absorb the bitter truths of our own history, the revelation of our destructive potential, *except* through the mediation of art (the manifestation of our other, our constructive, potential)." The "mediation of art" is defined here as "the manifestation of our other, our constructive, potential." Without this "constructive, potential" there can be no understanding of the possibilities for transformation since "the facts poison us unless we can find a way both to acknowledge their reality with our whole selves and, accepting it, muster the will to transcend it." Levertov recommends that we "absorb the bitter truths of our own history," "acknowledge their reality," "accept" and "transcend." Levertov sees this receptivity as the most active and necessary form of historical and political engagement, and the most effective way to affect transformation. In order to get a better idea of how

¹⁴³ Levertov, *NSE*, 141-2. "Paradox and Equilibrium" was written as a contribution to the catalogue of the 1988 Massachusetts College of Art exhibition which accompanied the visit of the Marukis who created the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Murals.

this engagement takes place within poetry I will consider what is special about language as opposed to other media used in the creation of works of art.

All art is a mediation in the sense that it must come through something whether the medium is paint, clay, scrap metal or the human body, but in the case of poetry a double mediation occurs. Poetry arises from pen and paper, or a keyboard and a screen, and it comes also through language. Is this what makes language different from other media? Derrida believes that language always resists being treated as though it is simply a raw material to be manipulated according to human intention. The question he asks is not what language is but what language does. Derek Attridge writes about Derrida's view that within language there lies the possibility of discovering the "other of language":

a verbal artifact can never close upon itself, and the other that summons from literature is not confined within language in the narrow sense. Derrida comments: 'I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the 'other' and the 'other of language.'¹⁴⁴

In keeping with Levertov's definition of "the mediation of art" as "our other, our constructive, potential," Derrida acknowledges that language mediates by enabling humans to search for the "other." This "other of language" is heard as a "summons" arising from language. Blanchot summarises this state of affairs when he writes that "[t]he poet is the mediator; he connects the near to the far."¹⁴⁵ Poetry acts to bring the near and the far together. Unlike paint or clay, language is characterized by

¹⁴⁴ Derek Attridge, introduction, *Acts of Literature*, by Jacques Derrida, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992) 20. Derrida's comment is quoted from "Deconstruction and the Other," *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984) 123.

distance even before the poet begins to work with it. The poet witnesses a double mediation because while she works with words, rearranging and reworking, she must also recognise that language has already slipped from her control.

Far from causing grief, this recognition enables Levertov to listen to language as she works with it. This stance of listening is crucial to her sense of poetry as something which nurtures relationship with what is beyond herself. Levertov believes that "[w]hen words penetrate deep into us they change the chemistry of the soul, of the imagination."¹⁴⁶ When we are exposed to experience that is not ours but which becomes ours through language we are changed by the encounter. Levertov's own poetry voices the anguish of political prisoners, despairs at the reality of nuclear warfare, is sickened by the actions of humans who choose to kill rather than cooperate with one another, delights at the relentless regenerative patterns of nature, and desires a deeper relationship with the surrounding world. Her poetry is best described as a relationship which exposes readers to the possibility of extending their experience and entering into their own relationship with what is outside themselves. In the next chapter I will explore ways in which poetry is instrumental in nurturing faith in the possibility of such a relationship.

¹⁴⁵ Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 114.

¹⁴⁶ Levertov, "The Poet in the World," *NSE*, 136.

CHAPTER THREE

Listening

Poetry, for Levertov, is a vocation which involves a poet listening and thus becoming aware of "something" — autonomous, musical and mysterious — in experience. Throughout the poetry there is a clear development of faith in the possibility of relationship between the poet and this "something." Early poems such as "The Thread" and "The Novices" demonstrate knowledge of an unspecified spirit while the later poems testify to a relationship with "God." In this chapter I reflect on faith as it is presented in Levertov's poetics, a few early poems, and in relation to the work of several contemporary thinkers, among them Rahner, Levinas, Derrida and Hart.

"The Thread" is a subtle, stirring testimony to the presence of an invisible power sensed by the speaker.¹⁴⁷ She cannot identify the "something" that gently pulls her. It is not seen or heard but felt, "invisibly, silently," and initiates in the speaker "a stirring / of wonder":

Something is very gently,
invisibly, silently,
pulling at me — a thread
or net of threads
finer than cobweb and as
elastic. I haven't tried
the strength of it. No barbed hook

¹⁴⁷ Levertov, "The Jacob's Ladder," 1961, *P*, 50.

pierced and tore me. Was it
 not long ago this thread
 began to draw me? Or
 way back? Was I
 born with its knot about my
 neck, a bridle? Not fear
 but a stirring
 of wonder makes me
 catch my breath when I feel
 the tug of it when I thought
 it had loosened itself and gone.

The speaker is content to let this power be since it is gentle and unobtrusive: "I haven't tried / the strength of it. No barbed hook / pierced and tore me." While it is gentle, however, its strength is profound. Levertov identifies this poem as an early testimony to "a strong, persistently occurring sense of awe and gratitude concerning the undercurrents of my own destiny."¹⁴⁸ Her exploration of this "something" continues throughout the rest of her career. In fact, the poems published after "The Thread" concern themselves primarily with this exploration.

The poetry's development parallels the shift in Levertov's faith from a position of agnosticism to Christianity. She writes that "if some new element enters one's life, it will enter one's work, which is at the center of one's life, and change it in some way."¹⁴⁹ This connection between life and work is particularly evident when it comes to her spiritual beliefs. Levertov uses the phrase "the imagination of faith" to evoke a sense of the interactions in her poetry between imagination and spiritual belief:

in my own case I think the fact that my poems have been addressing doubts and hopes rather than proclaiming certainties has turned out to make them accessible to some readers, letting them into the process as I have engaged in building my own

¹⁴⁸ Levertov, "A Poet's View," *NSE*, 242-3.

¹⁴⁹ Levertov, "Invocations of Humanity: Denise Levertov's Poetry of Emotion and Belief," by Joan F. Hallisey, 1986, Brooker, *Conversations*, 147.

belief structure step by step. They are poems written on the road to an imagined destination of faith.¹⁵⁰

Poetry invites the reader to glimpse faith as an imaginative process that is more concerned with "doubts and hopes" than with "certainties." As Juan Alfaro points out, "[f]aith is a compact act of many different aspects. No doubt these may be analysed, but they form an organic whole and are therefore unintelligible unless studied in their organic interrelation."¹⁵¹ He highlights the variety of definitions available to modern thought:

Modern exegetes are agreed that faith includes knowledge of a saving event, confidence in the world of God, man's humble submission and personal self-surrender to God, fellowship in life with Christ, and a desire for perfect union with him beyond the grave: faith is man's comprehensive "Yes" to God revealing himself as man's saviour in Christ.¹⁵²

Clearly, faith is not just a theological virtue but a belief in the possibility of experiencing relationship with God. I am concerned particularly with faith as "knowledge of a saving event." As I see it, writing poetry and exercising religious faith are both a kind of "knowledge" that relationship with "something" beyond the self is already occurring and will continue to occur in the future. Rahner connects poetry and religion when he argues that "a receptive capacity for the poetic word" is an essential preparation for becoming a Christian. For Rahner, there is a natural correspondence between poetry and religious faith since, as he puts it, "[i]n the region encompassed by the human word, infinity has built itself a tent, infinity itself is there in the finite."¹⁵³ Transcendence as it occurs in the experience

¹⁵⁰ Levertov, "Work that Enfaiths," *NSE*, 257.

¹⁵¹ Juan Alfaro, "Faith," *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner (London: Burns, 1975) 500.

¹⁵² Alfaro, "Faith," 500.

¹⁵³ Karl Rahner, "Poetry and the Christian," *Theological Investigations IV*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 362.

of poetry can lead one to become more attuned to transcendence in other experience.

What then attunes us in the first place to the experience of poetry?

For Rahner it is a capacity "to hear." He suggests that the Christian,

must be able to hear the word through which the silent mystery is present, he must be able to perceive the word which touches the heart in its inmost depths, he must be initiated into the human grace of hearing the word which gathers and unites and the word which in the midst of its own finite clarity is the embodiment of the eternal mystery. But what do we call such a word? It is the word of poetry; this power to hear means that one has heard the poetic word and abandoned oneself to it in humble readiness, till the ears of the spirit were opened for it and it penetrated his heart.¹⁵⁴

Poetry "touches the heart in its inmost depths" and opens it to "the eternal mystery." Given Rahner's belief that hearing "the poetic word" is a "prerequisite for Christianity,"¹⁵⁵ I wonder what the prerequisite might be for hearing? It would be fascinating to listen to a conversation between Rahner and Levertov on this matter. I will, however, do my best to outline what I think Levertov's answer to this question might be. First of all, I think she would say, with passion, that the prerequisite for hearing poetry is the capacity to listen not only with the ears but with the imagination. In fact listening is the privileged mode of perception in her poetry. In her essay "Grass Seed and Cherry Stones" she points to Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading* as an important touch-stone in her development as a poet. In particular, she highlights Pound's approach to listening: "The way to learn the music of verse is to listen to it."¹⁵⁶ Listening is fundamental to writing poetry and to an appreciation of it. Levertov asserts that she "would like to see the lives of those who already care about poetry still further enriched

¹⁵⁴ Rahner, "Poetry and the Christian," 363.

¹⁵⁵ Rahner, "Poetry and the Christian," 363.

¹⁵⁶ Levertov, 1972, *PIW*, 250.

by learning to listen more openly, less tensely and self-consciously, and without trying to quickly paraphrase the poem as they listen."¹⁵⁷ Clearly, listening is different from hearing a poem. To listen is to place oneself in a relation of receptivity with regard to language, which entails being able to recognise a poem's autonomy, musicality and mystery. As Levertov sees it, listening is an act of faith.

Levertov asserts that "[f]or a poet . . . imagination (which, obviously, comes with the territory) is a prerequisite for faith."¹⁵⁸ Imagination and listening go hand in hand and together they have the effect of nurturing faith. Levertov asserts that poetry is "written on the road to an imagined destination of faith" and thus "[e]very work is an 'act of faith.'"¹⁵⁹ In her view, imagination not only "comes with the territory" of poetry but imagination *is* its territory. Imagination, which constitutes poetry as listening, is what enables faith. Levertov's outline of this chain of events sheds some light on Rahner's statement regarding the causal link between poetry and faith. When she connects imagination with faith, she highlights the way both involve taking an imaginative leap into the unknown:

The artist must dive into waters whose depths are unplumbed, and trust that he or she will neither be swallowed up nor come crashing against a cement surface four foot down, but will rise and be buoyed upon them. Every work of art, even if long premeditated, enters a stage of improvisation as soon as the artist moves from thinking about it to beginning to form its concrete reality. That step, from entertaining a project for a poem or other work of art, to actually painting, composing, dancing, writing it, resembles moving from intellectual assent to opening the acts of daily life to permeation by religious faith. I know the first from experience; I know the second only from a distance, but my experience enables me to imagine it, and to see that such permeation is 'faith that works.'¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Levertov, "An Approach to Public Poetry Listenings," 1965, *LUC*, 52.

¹⁵⁸ Levertov, "A Conversation with Denise Levertov," interview by Brooker, 1995, Brooker, *Conversations*, 186.

¹⁵⁹ Levertov, "Work That Enfaiths," *NSE*, 257.

¹⁶⁰ Levertov, "Work That Enfaiths," *NSE*, 249.

Poetry necessitates a journey from “thinking about it to beginning to form its concrete reality.” This does not occur without the imagination. Within poetry we can witness the transformation of “intellectual assent to opening the acts of daily life to permeation by religious faith.” In the final three chapters I discuss this event of “opening” as it occurs in Levertov’s poetry.

Difficulties arise when attempting to speak about a creative “opening” that is akin to, or simultaneous with, permeation by religious faith. On occasion Levertov refuses to speak about the creative process because she believes that speaking about it can interfere with the process. In an interview with Joan F. Hallisey, she declines to comment upon the interaction between her poetry and religious faith:

HALLISEY: In ‘A Poet’s View,’ you speak about your own spiritual journey toward belief in ‘the God of the Incarnation’ during the last several years. Could you tell us how this journey influences your understanding of your vocation as poet?

LEVERTOV: I cannot really answer this without jeopardizing my creative work, I’m afraid. It would have to be asked ten years from now, retrospectively! It is fatal to one’s artistic life to talk about something that is in process.¹⁶¹

At other times, however, Levertov discusses at length her writing process which involves faith at both a personal and creative level. For example, she explores the importance of imagination in both personal and creative faith: “I do have faith in what Keats called the *truth of the imagination*; . . . when I’m following the road of imagination (*following a leading*, as the Quakers say), both in the decisions of a day and in the word-by-word, line-by-line decisions of a poem in the making, I’ve come to see certain analogies, and also some interaction, between the journey of art and the

¹⁶¹ Levertov, “Invocations of Humanity,” Brooker, *Conversations*, 147.

journey of faith."¹⁶² The "decisions of a day" and poetry's "word-by-word, line-by-line decisions" are equally reliant upon the imagination.

Levertov's emphasis upon the imagination is evident when she asserts her views about a range of issues such as the environment or the delivery of health care. Wherever there is relationship, whether between a person and the environment, or between a doctor and a patient, Levertov perceives a need for the active involvement of the imagination. As she sees it, this involvement enables "empathy and compassion." For example, she believes that medical practitioners whose imaginations actively assist them in the workplace have a deeper understanding of their patients' conditions:

For a doctor or nurse, for example, this greater sensitivity to language might well mean the development of a keener ear for the emotions and sensations which patients, however restricted their means of articulation, may be trying to express. By the same token, language-sensitive physicians and nurses might be enabled, by careful and imaginative word-choice, to impart more efficiently to patients and their families and to co-workers the information they need. This more accurate and flexible comprehension and utilization of language is not separable from the awakened and functioning imagination. Empathy and compassion, functions of the imagination, lead to the 'inspired' word or phrase, the verbal accuracy, 'hitting the nail on the head,' which leads to further enlightenment, and in turn to a deeper comprehension of the situation.¹⁶³

Sensitivity to language, which is "not separable from the awakened and functioning imagination," can lead to "the development of a keener ear for the emotions and sensations." Listening or "the development of a keener ear" is, for Levertov, the culmination of an individual's active nurturance of the imagination.

¹⁶² Levertov, "Work That Enfaiths," *NSE*, 248-9.

¹⁶³ Levertov, "Talking to Doctors," *LUC*, 95.

A poem written quite early in Levertov's career, "The Novices,"¹⁶⁴ explores the activity of listening as it occurs in a world that is largely unknown and uncontrolled by the figures in the poem. A man and a boy listen to a mysterious call. Their listening becomes more acute as the poem develops so that what begins as a blind response becomes a deep commitment to listen to the call:

They enter the bare wood, drawn
by a clear-obscure summons they fear
and have no choice but to heed.

A rustling underfoot, a
long trail to go, the thornbushes grow
across the dwindling paths.

Until the small clearing, where they
anticipate violence, knowing some rite
to be performed, and compelled to it.

The man moves forward, the boy
sees what he means to do: from an oaktree
a chain runs at an angle into earth

and they pit themselves to uproot it,
dogged and frightened, to pull the iron
out of the earth's heart.

But from the further depths of the wood
as they strain and weigh on the great chain
appears the spirit,

the wood-demon who summoned them.
And he is not bestial, not fierce
but an old woodsman,

gnarled, shabby, smelling of smoke and sweat,
of a bear's height and shambling like a bear.
Yet his presence is a spirit's presence

and awe takes their breath.
Gentle and rough, laughing a little,
he makes his will known:

¹⁶⁴ Levertov, "O Taste and See," 1964, P, 128.

not for an act of force he called them,
 for no rite of obscure violence
 but that they might look about them

and see intricate branch and bark,
 stars of moss and the old scars
 left by dead men's saws,

and not ask what that chain was.
 To leave the open fields
 and enter the forest,

that was the rite.
 Knowing there was mystery, they could go.
 Go back now! And he receded

among the multitude of forms,
 the twists and shadows they saw now, listening
 to the hum of the world's wood.

In the first five tercets the man and boy are "dogg~~ed~~ and frightened." They "have no choice" but to "pit themselves to uproot" the chain in the ground. However, what appears to be a "summons" to carry out "violence" becomes, by the sixth tercet, an appearance of "the spirit." From this point on, words such as "awe," "breath," "gentle," "laughing," "intricate," "moss" and "knowing" usher in a sense of compassion and understanding. At the end of the poem the voice recedes but the attitude of listening remains: "And he receded / among the multitude of forms, the twists and shadows they saw now, listening / to the hum of the world's wood." The spirit recedes, merging with "the multitude of forms," and his voice dissolves into "the hum of the world's wood." Finally the man and the boy listen with an awareness of the whole environment rather than the spirit's lone voice. At the end of the poem they "see" the forest:

not for an act of force he called them,
 for no rite of obscure violence
 but that they might look about them

and see intricate branch and bark,
stars of moss and the old scars
left by dead men's saws,

and not ask what that chain was.
To leave the open fields
and enter the forest,

that was the rite.
Knowing there was mystery, they could go.

Just as listening replaces the task of finding and uprooting the chain, awareness replaces fear: "Knowing there was mystery, they could go." For Levertov, this knowing, or "faithful attention,"¹⁶⁵ is enabled by the kind of listening that occurs in the writing of poetry:

If you do *not* give the experience your patient attention, you may be working solely by will and intelligence, and then you have to manipulate the experience. If you are very skillful, you may do some good things this way; but they are relatively superficial. But if you give to your material a kind of humble devotion, or attention, you will, if you have got any native talent to help you along, be *given* a good deal. And if you *persist*, then sometimes you are given the poet's special reward of the absolutely unpredictable. No amount of faithful attention can guarantee this, but sometimes you may be whirled right off your feet and taken into some areas of experience which you had never considered possible. This, indeed, is a gift. You cannot will it to happen. But you can place yourself in a relationship to your art to be able to receive it if it should happen; this relationship is 'faithful attention.'¹⁶⁶

Levertov observes that poets practise "patient attention" and "humble devotion" rather than aiming to "manipulate" experience. This stance of attentiveness sets the scene for the arrival of "the poet's special reward of the absolutely unpredictable."

Both "The Novices" and Ted Hughes's poem "The Thought Fox" describe "something" that occurs in a "forest." I want briefly to consider "The Thought Fox" since it deals specifically with the fruits of faithful

¹⁶⁵ Levertov, "Denise Levertov," interview by Sybil Estess, Brooker, *Conversations*, 96.

attention in the writing process. The speaker senses that “[s]omething else is alive” in “this midnight moment’s forest.” The “something” takes place as a movement rather than a thing:

I imagine this midnight moment’s forest:
 Something else is alive
 Beside the clock’s loneliness
 And this blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star:
 Something more near
 Though deeper within darkness
 Is entering the loneliness:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
 A fox’s nose touches twig, leaf;
 Two eyes serve a movement, that now
 And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints in the snow
 Between trees, and warily a lame
 Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
 Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,
 A widening deepening greenness,
 Brilliantly, concentratedly,
 Coming about its own business

Till, with a sudden sharp stink of fox
 It enters the dark hole of the head.
 The window is starless still; the clock ticks,
 The page is printed.¹⁶⁷

The mysterious fox occurs as a series of impressions: a nose touching a twig; prints being made in the snow; the surprise of “a sudden sharp hot stink of fox”; and its quick entrance into “the dark hole of the head.” These events accompany the arrival of words on the page. The fox disappears into the writer’s head and words materialise on the page. The writer pays close attention to the thought-fox: he is aware that

¹⁶⁶ Levertov, “Denise,” Estess, Brooker, *Conversations*, 96.

¹⁶⁷ Hughes, *The Hawk in the Rain* (London: Faber, 1957) 14.

"[s]omething else is alive / Beside the clock's loneliness / And this blank page where my fingers move." Inspiration arrives through listening rather than through trying to control words. The speaker is given what Levertov describes above as "the poet's special reward of the absolutely unpredictable." She stresses that "[y]ou cannot will it to happen. But you can place yourself in a relationship to your art to be able to receive it if it should happen; this relationship is faithful attention."¹⁶⁸ The speaker of "The Thought-Fox" drifts into the background after the first five lines, making way for the fox to occupy the foreground. He receives the fox into his writing and witnesses events from a distance. Even when, at the end of the poem, "[t]he page is printed," the fox continues to outshine the speaker who is presented simply as a "head" containing a "dark hole" through which the fox enters. The speaker succeeds not by attempting to control the process but by surrendering to it, that is, continually listening to "something" beyond himself.

Heidegger makes the point that listening undermines the practice of talking about language as though it is an object. In "A Dialogue on Language" he writes:

I: Speaking about language turns language almost inevitably into an object.

J: And then its reality vanishes.

I: We then have taken up a position above language, instead of hearing from it.¹⁶⁹

For Heidegger, we can avoid taking up "a position above language" and put ourselves instead in a position of "hearing from it." Thus listening is not the listening of a perceiving subject straining to detect certain audible

¹⁶⁸ Levertov, "Denise," Estess, Brooker, *Conversations*, 96.

¹⁶⁹ Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language," 1953-4, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (San Francisco: Harper, 1971) 50-1.

qualities of language. Rather, it is an experience that is undergone with language, even before language speaks:

It is the custom to put speaking and listening in opposition: one man speaks, the other listens. But listening accompanies and surrounds not only speaking such as takes place in conversation. The simultaneousness of speaking and listening has a larger meaning, speaking is of itself a listening. Speaking is listening to the language which we speak. Thus, it is a listening not *while* but *before* we are speaking.¹⁷⁰

The notion that speaking is "a listening not *while* but *before* we are speaking" resonates with Levertov's faith in "a certain kind of believing abandon to poetry."¹⁷¹ In her exploration of the sounds of John Wiener's poems, she refers to his poetry as "melopoeic"¹⁷² and asserts that "faith in the imagination" is essential before an understanding of poetry is possible: "I think a certain kind of believing abandon to poetry can bring about what seems a miracle (and perhaps it is): the tapping of a buried fountain in the poet from which the music flows. Mediocrity is perhaps due not so much to a lack of imagination as to lack of faith in the imagination, lack of the capacity for this abandon."¹⁷³ Just as Heidegger proposes a "listening not *while* but *before*," Levertov acknowledges that a stance of "believing abandon" or listening, must be assumed before "the tapping of a buried fountain in the poet" can occur.

John Hollander's reflections on reading (and rereading and misreading) the psalms paint a rich picture of the kind of world the poet inhabits even before encountering a text. A poet is receptive to alternative possibilities for sound and meaning in language and thus brings an attuned ear to reading. A certain text may enhance the reader's capacity to hear

¹⁷⁰ Heidegger, "The Way to Language," *On the Way to Language*, 123-4.

¹⁷¹ Levertov, "To Write is to Listen," 1965, *PIW*, 227. This is a review of John Wiener's *Ace of Pentacles*. Melopoeia is defined in the *OED* as "[t]he art of composing melodies; the part of dramatic art concerned with music."

¹⁷² Levertov, "To Write is to Listen," *PIW*, 229.

poetry in it — some texts do this better than others — but without sufficient receptivity on the part of the reader the text will fail to promise whatever possibilities may be within it. With regard to the psalms, Hollander remarks that “[t]he layers of misreading and rereadings are part of the poetry of the text itself in the poetic portions of the Bible. And the problems and puzzles of the psalms will remain eternal occasions for the reader’s negative capability as well as for the interpretive wit that turns every reader into a poet, if only momentarily.”¹⁷⁴ The reader’s capacity to listen for what is both intended and unintended or, in Hollander’s words, her “negative capability” and “interpretive wit,” enables a kind of dance to occur between herself and the text. While the reader cannot control the process, she desires to read and reread because of her knowledge that the dance always delivers something new.

Listening is not confined to the artistic process but occurs in many different situations. For example, listening can manifest as the attentive support offered by a doctor to her patients, or a way of life that is inspired by a commitment to respecting the natural environment and the life it supports. It is not necessary to be an artist, doctor or environmentalist in order to have an attentive relationship with the surrounding world. It is the stance of listening rather than the particular situation that is important. In her essay “Working and Dreaming” Levertov bears witness to the poetic gifts that arise from attention or listening:

The motif of a poem or story can arise from preliminary conscious thought or emerge like a dream from the unconscious, but once it begins to so emerge it glides or leaps past the watching mind’s eye at its own uncontrollable pace. How clear it is, and how much clearer it *becomes*, under scrutiny, depends on the writer’s attention, and on the degree to

¹⁷³ Levertov, “To Write is to Listen,” *PIW*, 227.

¹⁷⁴ John Hollander, *The Work of Poetry* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 128.

which he is able to translate into words, that which he experiences; or rather, on how well he can listen for the words that are its incarnation, its *taking on the flesh*. The closer his initial attention, the more easily he will be able to recall his vision and repeat and intensify his scrutiny. The dream, or the initial inspiration, grows, develops, gives forth more of its own substance upon each recall, if he is lucky.

Yes, there is something of labor in the creative process: but it consists in that *focusing of attention upon what is given*, and not in the 'struggle for expression.' That is where the basic misunderstanding lies.¹⁷⁵

That the poem's motif occurs at an "uncontrollable pace" suggests that, from the very outset, a poem has a certain life of its own. This is very important for Levertov, who prizes poetry as an autonomous thing in the Rilkean, and perhaps Heideggerian, sense of a "thing."¹⁷⁶ Creative effort, for Levertov, does not mean grasping for the right words. The poet labours hard but she does so at the service of poetry, in a stance of listening. As the above passage states, the poet can be "lucky" enough to discover the alchemy of words "*taking on the flesh*." However, this only occurs when she has relinquished her desire to capture the world around her within

¹⁷⁵ Levertov, 1970, *PIW*, 223.

¹⁷⁶ See Levertov, "Talking to Doctors," *LUC*, 97. She writes, "Rilke said that, 'If a thing is to speak to you, you must for a certain time regard it as the only thing that exists, the unique phenomenon that your diligent and exclusive love has placed at the center of the universe, something the angels serve that very day upon that matchless spot.'" For Heidegger's discussion of "thing" see his essay, "The Thing" in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper, 1971) 165-86. Heidegger attempts to depart from the perception of a thing as an object and desires instead to think of a thing as a process of "presencing" or "gathering." He believes that "no representation of what is present . . . ever reaches to the thing qua thing" (168-9). Heidegger notes that the word "thing" is used by the theologian Meister Eckhart with reference to "God": "Meister Eckhart uses the word *thing* ([Latin:] *dinc*) for God as well as for the soul. God is for him the 'highest and uppermost thing.' The soul is a 'great thing'" (176). Such usage of the two words is reminiscent of Levertov's linking of the words "thing" and "something" with the word "God." Although it is difficult to explain precisely Heidegger's word "thing," it is not at all difficult to understand in his writings the type of thinking he deems necessary in order for a thing to be comprehended "insofar as its things" (177). This thinking is in some ways similar to that which Levertov recommends. For example, Levertov would agree with Heidegger's declaration that "[t]he first step toward such vigilance is the step back from the thinking that merely represents — that is, explains — to the thinking that responds and recalls" (181).

language and is committed instead to the task of giving herself to the creative process.

The difference between Levertov's poetics and the dominant Western mode of scientific enquiry is obvious: Levertov's "total meaning" is highly valued precisely because it cannot be replicated. The emphasis is not on "findings" but on the finding itself. Levertov believes in the necessity for the poet to stay faithful to the finding or, in other words, to listen to the finding as it occurs. Only in this way can poetry be recognised as autonomous: the poet remains attentive to form that is "discovered in the relation of the events" rather than form that is simply imposed from outside. In "A Poet's View," Levertov writes about the artist as participant rather than director of the creative process:

My intellectual creed, when I formulate it, turns out to be an aesthetic one, as befits an artist. I believe:

in inspiration, to which intelligent craft serves as midwife; that the primary impulse of the artist is to make autonomous things from the materials of a particular art; and in the obligation of the artist to adhere to vision, to the inspired experience, and not make merely cosmetic 'improvements.' I believe in the obligation to work from within.

It will readily be seen that though I have called these commitments aesthetic, they merge, especially in the third instance, with the ethical.¹⁷⁷

Like a "midwife," the artist can assist with delivery but ultimately the process has a life of its own. Poems are evidences of this process. They are "autonomous things" that resist objectification. This is where the meshing of Levertov's aesthetics and ethics is most clear to me. If we continually place ourselves in a position of power over the things in our world as though they are objects to be manipulated for our own ends, apart from destroying ourselves by making our physical world uninhabitable, we

¹⁷⁷ Levertov, "A Poet's View," *NSE*, 240.

are missing out on another kind of power that has nothing to do with manipulation. In Levertov's poetry this power springs from a receptive relationship with the surrounding world.

Autonomy is highly valued by Levertov because she believes that an autonomous work is not simply an object to be acted upon in some way, but is able to generate its own mysterious energies, to act upon the world. Levertov would agree with Derrida's view that "[t]he work, the opus, does not belong to the field, it is the transformer of the field."¹⁷⁸ Regarding the autonomy of art, both Levertov and Derrida emphasise the importance of the work of art more than they emphasise the artist. Blanchot, too, privileges the work. He declares that "[t]he poetic word is no longer someone's word. In it no one speaks, and what speaks is not anyone. It seems rather that the word alone declares itself. Then language takes on all of its importance. It becomes essential."¹⁷⁹ Autonomy is the high point of literature for Blanchot. Although Levertov would not stress the loss of subjectivity to the same extent as Blanchot, she would agree with the necessity for poetry in which "the word alone declares itself." Autonomy is essential for poetry to be a response that has transformative rather than merely descriptive power.

As Levertov sees it, we discover ourselves in language. When language reveals something it does so, not from a distance as though it is showing us something external to our selves, but in close proximity with us: "In poetry...man is reunited on the foundation of his existence. There he comes to rest; not indeed to the seeming rest of inactivity and emptiness of thought, but to that infinite state of rest in which all powers and relations

¹⁷⁸ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 215.

¹⁷⁹ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 41.

are active."¹⁸⁰ We discover ourselves as we come in contact with an "infinite state of rest in which all powers and relations are active." In this state there is, paradoxically, self and that which exceeds self, and rest that is simultaneous with activity. In Levinas's thinking, too, there is a paradox involving self and that which is other than self. He points out that when we discover ourselves it is never as "consciousness, that is, as the identity of an ego endowed with knowledge or (what amounts to the same thing) with powers."¹⁸¹ The "identity" of the "ego," as well as "knowledge" and "powers" are real enough but within and beyond them there is a proximity that enables an ethical relation with the other, bringing ego, knowledge and powers in contact with the infinite.¹⁸² The "ambiguity" of the subject and the "ambivalence" of signification are essential to Levinas's idea of proximity:

This ambivalence is the exception and subjectivity of the subject, its very psyche, a possibility of inspiration. It is the possibility of being the author of what had been breathed in unbeknownst to me, of having received, one knows not from where, that of which I am author. In the responsibility for the other we are at the heart of the ambiguity of inspiration. The unheard-of saying is enigmatically in the anarchic response, in my responsibility for the other. The trace of infinity is this ambiguity in the subject, in turns beginning and makeshift, a diachronic ambivalence which ethics makes possible.¹⁸³

Given the above emphasis on "the ambiguity of inspiration" and "saying," it almost seems as though Levinas might affirm creative writing as an activity of ethical significance. Saying is ambivalent because it opens us to infinity and at the same time turns us away. This ambivalence is evident too in Levertov's poetry which both promises and refuses its speaker an

¹⁸⁰ Levertov, "Origins of a Poem," 1968, *PIW*, 51.

¹⁸¹ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991) 83.

¹⁸² Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 157.

¹⁸³ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 148-9.

experience of God. In order to better understand what might be meant by "saying" and "ambivalence" with regards to poetry I turn now to Derrida's critique of the Heideggerian notion of belonging in language.

Derrida problematizes the notion, forwarded by Heidegger, of "belonging" in language when he investigates the split or double action of language. He argues that language necessarily functions in line with matters of reference and meaning while losing itself in the process.¹⁸⁴ It means something, situated as it is within genre, history and a specific context, and it also means nothing. It is singular and dispersed at once or, in Derrida's words, "[i]t loses itself to offer itself."¹⁸⁵ When I read Heidegger on language I get the feeling that there is everything to gain and nothing to lose by belonging in language, even taking into account the inevitable estrangement language brings about. I can dwell in language and, while my "self-possession and self-identity"¹⁸⁶ is disrupted, I do not risk losing altogether my status as subject. According to Derrida, disruption, or what he terms "non-belonging,"¹⁸⁷ is precisely what always occurs in language. He believes that Heidegger's figuring of language as "essence" is flawed and prefers instead to speak about language as an active site or space which is essentially disruptive: "we still *have trouble* defining the question of literature, dissociating it from the question of truth, from the essence of language, from essence itself. Literature 'is' the place or experience of this 'trouble' we also have with the essence of language,

¹⁸⁴ See Derrida, *Points . . . Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf, et al. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995). With regard to the subject, Derrida believes that belonging is bound up with loss to such a degree that subjectivity has an impossible relationship with the other. He writes, "my relation to myself is first of all plunged into mourning, a mourning that is moreover impossible" (321). Likewise, language turns on the same edge of possibility and impossibility.

¹⁸⁵ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 68.

¹⁸⁶ Gerald Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1997) 103.

¹⁸⁷ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 68.

with truth and with essence, the language of essence in general."¹⁸⁸ The trouble with literature, as with language, is that it cannot be reduced to an "essence." Attempts to define literature are always unsuccessful because literature acts to transform the subject that interrogates it.

In an introductory passage to Derrida's essay "The Law of Genre," Derek Attridge refers to Derrida's interest in Blanchot's *récit* "The Madness of the Day." He writes that "the story is of particular interest to Derrida because it is not merely a representation of a certain content; if so, it could be rephrased philosophically."¹⁸⁹ The story cannot be rephrased. Nor can it be probed with questions that call for essences. Derrida writes that "in this century the experience of literature crosses all the 'deconstructive' seisms shaking the authority and the pertinence of the question 'What is...?' and all the associated regimes of essence or truth."¹⁹⁰ Similarly, in Levertov's poetry, language functions not to provide definitions but situates itself in a space of dispersal. The activity of belonging that occurs in Levertov's poetry is also very clearly an event of non-belonging. The word "God," for example, is firmly located in both Jewish and Christian traditions, appearing in Levertov's poetry in the context of an individual's developing sense of relationship with the world. Yet no matter how many attempts are made, the word "God" cannot be grasped once and for all: its meaning can only be guessed at with reference

¹⁸⁸ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 48.

¹⁸⁹ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 222.

¹⁹⁰ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 48.

to other words like "divinity" or "the eternal."¹⁹¹ The best way to know this word "God" is to encounter it along with the rest of the poem in which it appears. Still, though, no definite answers are to be found. This brings to mind Derrida's point that there is "something irreducible in poetic or literary experience"¹⁹² and that the only way we can know language is to accept "an experience rather than an essence of literature."¹⁹³ That which is "irreducible" in poetry is experienced as exposure to something indefinable, or in other words, exposure to otherness. In the same way a mirror reveals the possibility of Perseus's annihilation, Levertov's poetry meditates the possibility of its own disruption.

Listening exposes the poet or reader to otherness or what Levertov refers to as the "Muse," "the X factor" and the "Unexpected."¹⁹⁴ The activity of the "Muse" in poetry releases a poem from its dependence upon the artist. It becomes a thing in its own right and this autonomy is realised through the poet's receptivity to the "total meaning" of what is taking place in the creation of poetry. Total meaning is accessed through witnessing the Muse at work in events which, although intimately connected with human experience, unfold independently of human intention. In fact, in Levertov's poetry experience can occur even when something is not present to consciousness. It seems to me that what occurs in the poetry is

¹⁹¹ Levinas would say that God "unsays" itself. "The statement of the beyond being, of the name of God, does not allow itself to be walled up in the conditions of its enunciation. It benefits from an ambiguity or an enigma, which is not the effect of an inattention, a relaxation of thought, but of an extreme proximity of the neighbor, where the Infinite comes to pass . . . The revelation of the beyond being is perhaps indeed but a word, but this 'perhaps' belongs to an ambiguity in which the anarchy of the Infinite resists the univocity of an originary or a principle. It belongs to an ambiguity or an ambivalence and an inversion which is stated in the word God, the *apex* of vocabulary, admission of the stronger than me in me and of the 'less than nothing,' nothing but an abusive word, a beyond themes in a thought that does not yet think or thinks more than it thinks" (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 156).

¹⁹² Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 50.

¹⁹³ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 45.

¹⁹⁴ Levertov, "A Conversation," Sutton, Brooker, *Conversations*, 12.

similar to what happens at the moment a photograph is taken. The photograph itself can never provide a full picture of the event and each time someone looks at the photograph the viewing experience is different. Hence the tendency to linger over old photographs even though they may have been viewed hundreds of times already. The experience of looking generates a desire to look further, or a faith that something more is to be discovered in the looking. This faith is not faith *in* anything, but faith that occurs as the desire for something that cannot be registered by consciousness. Without knowing exactly what it is we are looking for, or what we desire, we continue along in the direction of some presence which we cannot connect with directly. We only know it by travelling the path, of desire, towards it.

Hart engages with Derrida on the question of whether something can be present to consciousness and, in doing so, he argues that faith is an activity that lies at the heart of human experience:

The argument I have borrowed from Derrida establishes that no presence can present itself to consciousness. Although many post-structuralists seem to think otherwise, Derrida's reasoning does not entitle one to conclude that there is no presence as such. Presence is a faith, not an illusion, and faith works itself out in an endless response to traces of the divine.¹⁹⁵

Hart's statement that "[p]resence is a faith, not an illusion" has important implications for thinking about the way humans interact with their world. If presence is not an illusion but something that humans always approach in faith, then it need not be missed altogether. Presence is something that humans can respond to. Hence Hart's observation that poetry preserves a presence that is already lost to consciousness: "[f]or me, poetry involves a loss of origin, opens onto that loss and responds to it in an exemplary

¹⁹⁵ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 298.

way."¹⁹⁶ I am interested in exploring poetry as response, especially given Hart's assertion that "poetry involves a loss of origin." I wonder whether presence is a kind of loss that lies at the heart of experience.¹⁹⁷

I think the desire to look at things in the world is also the desire to know ourselves more fully. And yet looking is an encounter with "a loss of origin." From a broadly psychoanalytic perspective this encounter can be explored by examining the encounter between the conscious mind and the unconscious. In the same way that presence does not present itself to consciousness but is nevertheless always approached, the unconscious is not present to the conscious mind but is something to which humans are compelled to respond. Levertov does not discuss the unconscious in much detail, although she does make fleeting reference to its importance in poetry. It is clear from her comments regarding poetry and the unconscious that she believes poetry would be incapable of acting in the world without the involvement of the unconscious. For example, she writes that "[a] poem in which the intellect and conscious mind have predominated can be a very good poem, but not at deep levels. I think that what happens if one gets oneself into this state of meditation . . . is that you are reaching down deeper into your consciousness, or unconscious, and of course it's going to have a deeper effect on the reader because it's going to

¹⁹⁶ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 286.

¹⁹⁷ The idea of otherness occurring within experience began with G.W.F. Hegel's definition of *Erfahrung* in his *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie (London: Allen, 1931). Hegel declares that "[c]onsciousness knows and comprehends nothing but what falls within its experience" (96). This occurs because mind is an object "in the process of becoming an other to itself" and it thus succeeds in "transcending this otherness" (96). The effect of Hegel's thinking is evident in the work of Levinas, Derrida and Blanchot, all of whom would agree with Levertov's idea of otherness occurring within experience.

speak to him at that same level."¹⁹⁸ A "deeper effect" occurs in poetry that involves the "unconscious."¹⁹⁹

In order to realise the involvement of the unconscious it seems essential to practise not only attentive looking but also attentive listening. Once again, Keats's Negative Capability is of primary importance: a poet's commitment to "being in" enables her encounter "total meaning" in addition to meanings that are evident to the conscious mind.

Levertov's "total meaning," then, is closely related to the word "experience." Hart's observation that "a poem offers no access to a privileged sphere, whether ethical or religious"²⁰⁰ offers a way of looking at "total meaning" in poetry as something that incorporates, rather than separates, different meanings. According to Hart, a poem "keeps us in the midst of what Wordsworth called 'the company of flesh and blood': it speaks to us in a relation charged with significance and with feeling, nothing more and nothing less."²⁰¹ It seems that poetry is "nothing more and nothing less" than another experience. In this sense, poetry is significant because of what it does not do. It does not reveal to us a special category of being since, as Hart points out, "poetry does not require a distinctive ontological status."²⁰² While poetry might reveal possibility it also reveals limits. Hart makes an interesting point about this phenomenon when he writes that "creation contests what makes it possible in the first

¹⁹⁸ Levertov, "A Conversation," Sutton, Brooker, *Conversations*, 13.

¹⁹⁹ The concept of the unconscious in literature is debated extensively by numerous thinkers. In particular, the work of Lacan, Kristeva and Irigaray on language is informed by psychological approaches to the unconscious. Levertov's view of the unconscious as a source of the poet's creative potential indicates her belief that the unconscious is instrumental in the way an individual uses language. This, however, is an area that remains largely unexplored in Levertov's prose writing and in the secondary criticism of her poetry.

²⁰⁰ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 292.

²⁰¹ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 292.

²⁰² Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 293.

place."²⁰³ Poetry certainly contests the space of possibility from which it arises. This appears to be why both "Bloom and Blanchot regard poetry as an experience of the limit."²⁰⁴ The limit or "loss of origin" can be thought of as poetry's moment of truth. Certainly, the significance of Levertov's poetry is due largely to the fact that it does not attempt to lay claim to an exclusive ontological realm. Rather, poetry and experience inhabit the same world, and whatever transcendence occurs in poetry also occurs in experience. One way of understanding this phenomenon is to consider the potential for poetry to act in the world.

Wordsworth declares that "the power of the human imagination is sufficient to produce such changes even in our physical nature as might almost appear miraculous."²⁰⁵ Wordsworth's conviction is reiterated by Levertov when she qualifies her own comparison between the process of creating poetry and the flight of Pegasus:

Such flights are not to be equaled with abstraction, as may too easily be done if one assumes that the earthy horse represents the concrete and the wings the abstract. Pegasus as horse does indeed present the sensual, the sensuous, the concretely specific, but that physicality is itself related to the unconscious — and not only to the instinctive but to the intuitive as well. And his wings, which do not deform but increase and enhance his equine characteristics of speed and strength of motion, express not the abstractions of linear intellection but the transcendent and transformative power of Imagination itself.²⁰⁶

In poetry, as in the flight of Pegasus, the imagination's "transcendent and transformative power" journeys with the "sensual, the sensuous, the concretely specific." It is not necessary to draw a distinction between

²⁰³ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 294.

²⁰⁴ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 294.

²⁰⁵ Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling, eds., *Romantic Poetry and Prose* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973) 609.

²⁰⁶ Levertov, "Horses with Wings," *NSE*, 112.

“concrete” and “abstract” because the imagination pervades and transforms both realities.

Given Levertov’s belief that “when words penetrate deep into us they change the chemistry of the soul,” it is not surprising that she perceives fundamental convergences between poetics and other discourses. In particular, she observes the involvement of poetics and science in the processes of attention and listening, and believes that both poetics and science have healing capabilities. According to Levertov, the poet sets an example of the way in which scientific observation can occur together with the discovery of one’s relationship with the world. She suggests that the practice of health professionals can be enhanced by combining objectivity with a loving recognition of the autonomous and intrinsically valuable life of patients:

Rilke said that, ‘If a thing is to speak to you, you must for a certain time regard it as the only thing that exists, the unique phenomenon that your diligent and exclusive love has placed at the center of the universe, something the angels serve that very day upon that matchless spot.’ . . . a *concerned attention* given by the diagnostician to the whole person — not merely as a body but as a social organism — seems to me not very different from the poet’s attention to the inscape, the *gestalt* of his theme. It involves objectivity, but it is an objectivity that arises from respect; that is, from the recognition of an identity, a life having its own integrity separate from one’s own and no less than one’s own. To give the respect of recognition is a form of love.²⁰⁷

In this extract Levertov makes an important point about her view regarding the origin of objectivity. When she speaks of an objectivity that “arises from respect; that is, from the recognition of an identity, a life having its own integrity separate from one’s own and no less than one’s own” she is implicitly rejecting any system of thought that would posit a separation between the attitude required of health professionals and of poets. Both of

these vocations involve objectivity and "concerned attention." It is the attitude, the willingness to approach one's work with respect and love, that distinguishes good practice, whether in medicine or poetry.

For Levertov, obedience is the unavoidable stance of artists in relation to "the transcendent." As she sees it, some artists do not know that they are opening their door to "the transcendent, the numinous":

To believe, as an artist, in *inspiration* or *the intuitive*, to know that without Imagination (and I give it the initial capital in conscious allusion to Keats's famous dictum) no amount of acquired craft or scholarship or of brilliant reasoning will suffice, is to live with a door of one's life open to the transcendent, the numinous. Not every artist, clearly, acknowledges that fact — yet 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.²⁰⁸

This "power which enters the individual," coupled with an "obedience to a vocation," suggests that there is something to which a poet responds imaginatively. Levinas, Derrida and Blanchot are concerned in their different ways with the possibilities for, and implications of, relationship between humans and otherness or what Levertov refers to above as "a power which enters the individual and is not a personal attribute."

For Levinas humans respond to alterity that already exists. The unavoidable stance of individuals in relation to alterity is one of obedience: "There is an obedience before the order has been understood, comprehended, even synthetically formulated for me — as though I find myself obedient to the law before it has been pronounced."²⁰⁹ Placed together, Levertov's door that is "open to the transcendent" and Levinas's idea of obedience to a "law before it has been pronounced" bring to mind

²⁰⁷ Levertov, "Talking to Doctors," *LUC*, 97.

²⁰⁸ Levertov, "A Poet's View," *NSE*, 241.

Kafka's parable, "Before the Law." Derrida summarizes the impossible position of those who discover themselves before this door: "What is deferred forever till death is entry into the law itself, which is nothing other than that which dictates the delay."²¹⁰ It seems that Kafka is presenting not some sticky situation in which one unfortunate individual finds himself, but an impossible condition which already applies to every one of us. We are all perhaps already exposed to and refused by something whose essence cannot be known. The closest we can come to knowing it is by witnessing our relationship with it. Levertov's poetry does not have the quality of obsessiveness found in Kafka's work. In contrast, her poems are extraordinarily tender and meditative. What Levertov and Kafka share, though, is the desire to know that there is something beyond the limits of their finite worlds. Both writers, in this process, encounter impossibility.

One of the ways in which Derrida addresses the encounter with the other is to think of the approach as prayer. His thoughts on prayer can be usefully considered in the light of Levertov's own exploration of poetry as a religious activity. Derrida writes about prayer as an address to the other:

In every prayer there must be an address to the other as other; *for example*, I will say, at the risk of shocking — *God*. The act of addressing oneself to the other as other must, of course, mean praying, that is, asking, supplicating, searching out. No matter what, for the pure prayer demands only that the other hear it, receive it, be present to it, be the other as such, a gift, call, and even cause of prayer.²¹¹

That "the other" must be addressed as "other" is an important point with regards to Levertov's poems, especially given her belief that poetry puts us in touch with something beyond ourselves: "I think of poetry as something

²⁰⁹ Alphonso Lingis, introduction, *Otherwise Than Being*, by Levinas, xvii.

²¹⁰ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 205.

²¹¹ Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," trans. Ken Frieden, *Languages of the Unsayable* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987) 41.

beyond the poet, of which the poet is a servant, and I think of it as a power, a force beyond oneself."²¹² It is not surprising then that Levertov thinks of writing poetry as a religious activity:

for me writing poetry, receiving it, is a religious experience. At least if one means by this that it is experiencing something that is deeper, different from, anything that your own thought and intelligence can experience in themselves. Writing itself can be a religious act, if one allows oneself to be put at its service. I don't mean to make a religion of poetry, no. But certainly we can assume what poetry is not — it is definitely not just an anthropocentric act.²¹³

The link with Derrida's other is clear from this passage. Writing poetry involves openness to "experiencing something that is deeper, different from, anything that your own thought and intelligence can experience in themselves." The way this "something" manifests in language is significant to the whole of Levertov's poetics since, for her, writing poetry is a form of religious practice that involves listening to this ungraspable "something" wherever it occurs.

Blanchot has some interesting ideas to add to this discussion. Like Levertov, he sees the poet as a mediator. For Blanchot, mediation takes place in language that is already in exile. The poet undergoes an "in-between" or "impossible" experience of immediacy.²¹⁴ To be "in-between" is not to hover in between the concrete and the abstract, or the human and the non-human, but to witness everywhere the absence of "the world of divine immediacy."²¹⁵ Blanchot describes the poet as a "mediator" but not in the sense of someone who renders experience accessible in language. Rather, he writes about poetry as an impossible

²¹² Levertov, "An Interview with Denise Levertov," by Maureen Smith, 1973, Brooker, *Conversations*, 85.

²¹³ Levertov, "Denise," Estess, Brooker, *Conversations*, 96.

²¹⁴ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 273.

²¹⁵ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 273.

event that involves a silent speaking that takes place in experience that is always past:

The poem — literature — seems to be linked to a spoken word which cannot be interrupted because it does not speak; it is. The poem is not this word itself, for the poem is a beginning, whereas this word never begins, but always speaks anew and is always starting over. However, the poet is the one who has heard this word, who has made himself into an ear attuned to it, its mediator, and who has silenced it by pronouncing it.²¹⁶

Blanchot's assertion that the poem "always speaks anew and is always starting over" is applicable to Levertov's use of the word "God," an utterance which is never final. Words in Levertov's poetry are not explanations but openings: they retain their mystery along with their meaning. The word "God," for example, does not serve a clarifying or filtering purpose as though it were a pair of binoculars that focuses meanings out of blurred experience, or a net that filters out ambiguity. As Blanchot puts it, "it does not speak; it is." Hart too argues against the view that language functions according to clarifying structures: "no forms or figures — however traditional, however non-traditional — allow a poem to become a window onto reality: the origin withdraws, and makes every poem an elegy at one level or another."²¹⁷ Language, as it turns out, is not only a house of dwelling but also, and at the same time, a squat. It is a home ground as well as being a way of keeping on with the journey into the unknown. As Hart puts it, "poetry involves a loss of origin, opens onto that loss and responds to it in an exemplary way."²¹⁸ He describes poetry as "both a making and an opening."²¹⁹ Levertov, like other poets, surrenders to this "making" and "opening" and risks losing herself in the

²¹⁶ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 37.

²¹⁷ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 301.

²¹⁸ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry" 286.

²¹⁹ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 286.

process. Certainly, in her case, poetry involves a surrender to the unknown that could not be fulfilled if the poet wanted certainty and comfort. Levertov's relationship with her surrounding world occurs in a poetry of faith and, as Hart points out, "[t]he life of faith never converts to a life of assurance."²²⁰ Levertov's religious faith and her poetics of faith are woven together in her poetry. Hart writes about this connection in poetry generally: "it seems to me that both poetry and religion begin as quests for the meaning of being, and that a reflection on experience sends the quester on an interminable detour, a meditation on the divergence of being and meaning. The believer discovers that the word 'God' generates so many meanings that it comes to mean little or nothing when one faces the abyss."²²¹ He suggests that "to survive this spiritual suffering is perhaps to realise that no meaning attaches to the being of God."²²² Having discovered that poetry is both a belonging and a kind of exile, a making and an opening, it is possible to discuss language as something other than a structure that decodes the world as meaning.

Blanchot's mourning of "the world of divine immediacy" goes hand in hand with a desire to connect with the divine:

The abyss is reserved for mortals. But it is not the empty abyss; it is the savage and eternally living deep from which the gods are preserved. They preserve us from it, but they do not reach it as we do. And so it is rather in the heart of man, symbol of crystalline purity, that the truth of the reversal can be fulfilled. It is man's heart that must become the place where light tests itself most severely, the intimacy where the echo of the empty deep becomes speech.²²³

For me, Blanchot's talk of "man's heart" restores a tenderness to his thinking on language. He writes that, in "speech," humans play a vital part

²²⁰ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 301.

²²¹ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 301.

²²² Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 301.

in sustaining connection with what he terms "the sacred." Hart offers some insight along these lines when he writes of Blanchot and spirituality: "While urging atheism in phrasings and tones that sometimes mimic those of the mystics, Blanchot remains a writer whose attention never strays from human passion. He knows the extremities of desire."²²⁴ It is reassuring to hear that "human passion" interests Blanchot since, as Hart points out, Blanchot's texts abound with desolate descriptions of the activity of language. When Blanchot urges us, then, to preserve the absence of the gods, he is not advocating a position of indifference. The opposite is true: he views the gods' absence as one side of a relation that opens out to the sacred. I will spend a little time exploring this strange relation so that its relevance to poetry might become clear.

With particular reference to Friedrich Hölderlin's poetry, Blanchot describes God's default as "the divine infidelity"²²⁵ and urges that the other side of the relation is the human stance in the face of this infidelity: "The gods today turn away; they are absent, unfaithful. And man must understand the sacred sense of this divine infidelity, not by opposing it, but by performing it himself."²²⁶ This human response is another infidelity that Blanchot describes as a "forgetting of everything":

the poet's task is no longer restricted to the overly simple mediation which required of him that he stand before God. It is before the absence of God that he must stand. He must become the guardian of this absence, losing neither it nor himself in it. What he must contain and preserve is the divine infidelity. For it is "in the form of infidelity where there is forgetting of everything" that he enters into communication with the god who turns away.²²⁷

²²³ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 275-6.

²²⁴ Hart, "The Blanchot Experience," *The Australian's Review of Books* 4.2 (March 1999) 18.

²²⁵ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 274.

²²⁶ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 272.

²²⁷ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 274.

In the face of "absence" the poet must "enter into communication." The word "absence" suggests something that is the opposite of presence.²²⁸ However, for Blanchot the two terms are part of the same event. Levertov's poem, "Dialogue"²²⁹ affirms the possibility of ongoing relationship between two people, and between the poet and the world, in terms of absence and presence:

'You know
better than I
the desolation is gestation. Absence
an absolute
presence
calling forth
the person (the poet)
into desperate continuance, toward
fragments of light.'

Just as two people are brought together in dialogue, the apparent oppositions "desolation" and "gestation," and "absence" and "presence," occur together. Blanchot explores this kind of impossible simultaneity when he writes about the sacred as "an in-between, an empty place opened by the double aversion, the double infidelity of gods and men."²³⁰ Communication occurs not only between humans but in human experience. For Blanchot, this communication connects humans with what he refers to as "All": "essentially, poetry relates to existence in its totality; wherever poetry asserts itself, existence, considered as All, also begins to assert itself."²³¹ In the language of poetry there is a meeting of gods and mortals, absence and presence, emptiness and excess. In short, a meeting of "All." Instead of existing at the mercy of human intention, poetry calls the poet into an opening towards otherness. The poet accepts this opening, not as

²²⁸ Absence and presence are presented as opposites in "The Lovers" and "The Absence." See Levertov, *CEP*. The poems appear on pages 44-5 and 81 respectively.

²²⁹ Levertov, *RA*, 90-1.

²³⁰ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 272.

something external to be accommodated but as something that is already occurring in experience. Perhaps this is what is meant by the short statement, "Poetry is Life!" graffitied on the toilet wall of LaMama theatre in Melbourne. Poetry calls the poet into its "desperate continuance," where presence and absence, and intimacy and estrangement, are found together. The poet realises poetry's autonomous existence when she responds to it and, at the same time, lets it go. Levertov compares this letting go with cutting an umbilical cord:

Up to a certain point the poet writing organic poetry believes in faithfulness to the events. But at a certain point he is made, if you will, to distort the events to a certain degree in order to cut them off. It's exactly like a cutting of the umbilical cord. It's a kind of violence. It is a breaking of the connections, but it enables the new child to live on its own.²³²

The image of an umbilical cord being cut in the act of creation is a potent reminder that the life of poetry is not entirely dependent upon the poet. Again, we see that "creation contests what makes it possible in the first place":²³³ by virtue of its autonomous existence poetry contests the primacy of the poet who creates it.

Levertov demonstrates her own recognition of autonomy in both an aesthetic and ethical sense when she writes of "life that wants to live among other forms of life that want to live." Drawing on Albert

²³¹ Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 115.

²³² Levertov, "A Conversation," Sutton, Brooker, *Conversations*, 12.

²³³ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 294.

Schweitzer's doctrine of "Reverence for Life"²³⁴ she outlines the significance, in her poetry, of the imagination's role in recognising "other forms of life that want to live." She describes this awareness as "imaginative recognition that brings compassion to birth."²³⁵ It seems that the imagination is what gives Levertov's poetics its ethical basis: poetry is not merely an intellectual recognition of otherness, including "other forms of life that want to live;" it is an "imaginative recognition" of otherness that necessarily involves a deep and active involvement between the poet and other forms of life. It seems to me that while intellectual recognition facilitates an appreciation of the relations between things, "imaginative recognition" facilitates relationship. Where poetry is concerned, listening is Levertov's way of acknowledging that things in the world are never isolated entities reliant upon human perception. Rather, they can be known only by realising their embeddedness in the experience of a poem.

²³⁴ Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) is famous for his theological writings and musical talent but mostly for his work as a medical doctor in Africa. His Reverence for Life doctrine is outlined in Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, trans. C.T. Campion and C.E.B. Russell, 3rd ed. (London: Black, 1923) and Schweitzer, *My Life and Thought*, trans. C.T. Campion (London: Unwin, 1924). Schweitzer speaks of his Reverence for Life doctrine as both an ethics and a morality since his ethics of preserving life is bound up with his moral code that deems the preservation of life "good" and destruction of life "evil." He writes, "[e]thics is nothing else than reverence for life. Reverence for life affords me my fundamental principle of morality, namely, that good consists in maintaining, assisting and enhancing life, and that to destroy, to harm or to hinder life is evil" (Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, xvi). This doctrine is Schweitzer's recipe for a harmonious practical and spiritual life: "The idea of reverence for life offers itself as the realistic answer to the realistic question of how man and the world are related to each other" (Schweitzer, *My Life*, 267); "It is in reverence for life that knowledge passes over into experience . . . My life bears its meaning in itself" (Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, xv). Spirituality, for Schweitzer, occurs in the experience of connection with the surrounding world: in "Religion and Modern Civilization," *The Christian Century* 51.47-8 (1930?) he states, "[w]e realize that all life is valuable and that we are united to all this life. From this knowledge comes our spiritual relationship to the universe" (1520). Schweitzer and Levertov have similar visions of spiritual and practical elements blending into a life that is guided by ethical principles. Specifically, the point of strongest convergence between them is their common belief in the spiritual significance of the profound interconnectedness between humans and the surrounding world. They both give testimony to their discovery of God in this relationship. While Schweitzer calls for a realisation of this relationship through thinking or rationality, Levertov emphasises the importance of the imagination.

²³⁵ Levertov, "Origins of a Poem," *PIW*, 52.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Well of Longing

I have so far emphasised notions of transcendence, experience and listening as they figure in Levertov's statements regarding poetry and poetics, and in the work of several contemporary thinkers. A poet's mode of communication is, however, through poetry rather than explanation. I have therefore pursued my enquiry into transcendence, experience and listening with the aim of identifying how they occur, not simply as concepts outlined in explicit statements, but as events in Levertov's poetry itself.

In the four early collections of poems discussed in this chapter the well is instrumental in the speaker's exploration of her self in relationship with the world. These early poems, collected in *The Double Image* (1946), *Here and Now* (1957), *Overland to the Islands* (1958) and *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961), express a desire to bridge the perceived gap between inner and outer worlds. Each collection goes about this in its own way. While *The Double Image* features the well as a symbol that attempts to represent the speaker's internal state, *Here and Now* and *Overland to the Islands* feature an image of the well that conveys intimacy between the speaker and the world. The influence of William Carlos Williams is evident in Levertov's use of enjambment, or what she refers to as the "linebreak." Levertov and Williams were friends throughout the 1950s until Williams's death in 1963. Out of this association grew Levertov's interest in

connecting thoughts and things in a language that attempts to be an experience in itself rather than a representation of experience. *The Jacob's Ladder* draws attention not only to experience but also to the experience of poetry. The imagination, necessary to the experience of poetry, is shown to be valuable in the development of an individual's intimate and attentive relationship with the world. In all four collections the speaker recognises and desires something that cannot be seen and the speaker is transformed in the journey towards this something. I find it useful to keep in mind Heidegger's *Erfahrung* when dealing with this invisible something. *Erlebnis* can propel the poet or the reader in a given direction but only *Erfahrung* promises, impossibly, to deliver him to the unknown. This compelling journey and promise is played out in Levertov's poetry in the evolving image of the well.

The Well as Symbol

In Levertov's first collection of poems, *The Double Image* (1946) the well functions as a symbol that connects human life and nature. In "Durgan," for example, the speaker's thoughts and emotions are mirrored by the natural world, as in the simile that compares the event of death with the transparency of water:

At Durgan waves are black as cypresses,
clear as the water of a wishing well,
caressing the stones with smooth palms, looking
into the pools as enigmatic eyes
peer into mirrors, or music echoes
out of a wood the waking dream of day,
blind eyelids lifting to a coloured world.

Now with averted head your living ghost
walks in my mind, your shadow leans
over the half door of dream; your footprint lies
where gulls alight; shade of shade, you laugh.
But separate, apart, you are alive:
you have not died, therefore I am alone.

Like birds, cottages white and grey
 alert on rocks are gathered, or low
 under branches, dark but not desolate;
 shells move over sand, or seaweed gleams
 with their clear yellow, as tides recede.
 Serene in storm or eloquent in sunlight
 Sombre Durgan where no strangers come
 awaits us always, but is always lost:
 we are separate, sharing no secrets, each alone;
 you will listen no more, now, to the sounding sea.

The speaker's vision of death is represented by a place called "Durgan" in which death can be seen as "waves" that are "black as cypresses, / clear as the water of a wishing well." The speaker perceives clearly that death waits calmly for everyone: "Serene in storm or eloquent in sunlight / sombre Durgan where no strangers come / awaits us always, but is always lost." Durgan is always present and absent. Speaking about death only confirms its elusiveness. The wishing well ties in with this theme of simultaneous presence and absence. Wishing at a well involves parting with something in the hope that one's loss will bring about a gain. Durgan — which "awaits us always, but is always lost" — enables the speaker to perceive that which will always remain unknown. Durgan reveals itself and remains hidden. The wishing well symbolises enduring faith in the midst of uncertainty: presence and absence; known and unknown worlds; and faith and uncertainty persist together in the structure of the well.

In "Five Aspects of Fear" the well is a symbol of connection between the imagination and the surrounding world.²⁴¹ In the fifth section, entitled "The Past Can Wait," the well is a place in which vision occurs:

In fear of floods long quenched, waves fallen,
 shattered mirrors darken with old cries;
 where no shot sounds the frightened birds go flying
 over heights of autumn soft as honey:
 each country left is full of our own ghosts
 in fear of floods quenched, waves fallen.

²⁴¹ Denise Levertoff, *DI*, 17-21. "Five Aspects of Fear" appears in this original collection and not in the later *CEP*. Since *The Double Image* is out of print I have included the entire poem in Appendix I.

Rags of childhood flutter in the woods
 and each deserted post has sentinels;
 bright eyes in wells watch for the sun's assassin;
 the regions bereft of our desires are haunted,
 rags of childhood flutter in the woods.
 Now when the night is blind with stars
 now when candles dazzle the day
 now
 turn from phantoms: they are preoccupied
 with a solved conundrum and an old pursuit.
 O, be deaf to what they say —
 rumours of distant winters and a broken bough —
 now when your love is a candle to dazzle the day.

At the outset of this poem, the passive "bright eyes" wait and watch for "the sun's assassin." Then, out of passivity and waiting arises a brilliance described as originating in love: "your love is a candle to dazzle the day." The well is a structure in which the meeting of inner and outer enables love to be perceived. The event of this meeting is the key to understanding what drives the rest of the poetry. Levertov's desire is for readers to be involved in the event of poetry and to be transformed by it. Guidance about the kind of reading required for this to occur can be found in the poetry itself. For example, in "Meditation and Voices" the well is a structure that functions as a kind of chamber in which the speaker connects with the outside world.²⁴² To neglect this chamber is to fail to perceive possibilities for the self in relationship with the world. The speaker cautions against turning away from this place of relationship: "The mortal failure is to turn away, / to lock the gates and throw away the key, / poison the well with droppings of deceit." In "Five Aspects of Fear" and "Meditation and Voices" the well is not simply a vessel of sustenance from which humans help themselves according to their need. It is a site that

²⁴² Levertov, *DI*, 28-30. The entire poem is in Appendix II.

occupies a far more intimate space in the human psyche since one's actions will always impact upon the condition of the well. When someone chooses to "turn away, / to lock the gates and throw away the key," this gesture constitutes a "mortal failure" and actually poisons the site. Clearly Levertov's ethical and spiritual beginnings are evident in these first poems.

In *The Double Image* the symbol of the well indicates, in descriptive language, the possibility of interaction between the self and the world. In later books, however, the image of the well forges those links in language that does not merely describe but also embodies, to various degrees, relationship between the self and what is beyond. Before proceeding to a discussion of the poems in *Here and Now*, I will consider some possible meanings of "symbol" with regard to poetry. This will help to construct a backdrop against which Levertov's later, more expansive, poetry can be viewed.

Alex Preminger asserts that "'symbol' derives from the Greek verb, *symballein*, meaning 'to put together,' and the related noun, *symbolon*, meaning 'mark,' 'token,' or 'sign,' in the sense of the half-coin carried away by each of the two parties of an agreement as a pledge."²⁴³ A similar but more structured approach is taken by Rainer Emig who, following Ferdinand de Saussure, remarks that,

[I]ike every other sign, the symbol can be described as having two parts: signifier and signified. The distinctive feature of the symbol is its unconventional use of a complex visual signifier, the *pictura* (Latin: 'painting') in connection with an equally complex signified, usually that of an abstraction, the *subscriptio* (Latin: 'signature').²⁴⁴ The Greek root of the word symbol (*symbolon* = 'watchword,' deriving from *symballein* = 'to throw together') hints at its multiple functions.²⁴⁵

²⁴³ Alex Preminger, ed., *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986) 273.

²⁴⁴ Rainer Emig, *Modernism in Poetry: Motivations, Structures and Limits* (London: Longman, 1995) 38. At this point, Emig references J. Link, *Literaturwissenschaftliche Grundbegriffe: Eine programmierte Einführung auf strukturalistischer Basis* (Munich: Fink, 1974) 168.

²⁴⁵ Emig, *Modernism in Poetry*, 38.

In these terms, the well in *The Double Image*, can be viewed as a sign that consists of "signifier" (the concrete, visible structure of the well) and "signified" (a deep connection between humans and the surrounding world). Emig remarks that a symbol "acts as a shorthand for complex statements." This is a probable weakness of symbol, however, and he finds evidence to that effect in the words of Roland Barthes, who asserts that the symbol is "analogical and inadequate" as exemplified in the fact that "Christianity 'outruns' the cross."²⁴⁶ Barthes's pithy comment is relevant to the way in which, in Levertov's poetry, the speaker's experience of the world "outruns" the symbol of the well. A symbol is typically outrun or exceeded by the reality or experience to which it refers since its function is not to recreate but to represent. Preminger points out that 'symbol' "in literary usage refers most specifically to a manner of representation in which what is shown (normally referring to something material) means, by virtue of association, something *more* or something *else* (normally referring to something immaterial)."²⁴⁷ The task of a symbol, then, is to gesture towards something beyond itself. This is why symbols play an important part in religion. Muriel Rukeyser notes that "the symbol is the dramatic element of religion — and the symbol is the expression of a distinct relationship between sacred energy and the human being."²⁴⁸ With particular reference to the symbol of the well, John Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant state that in "all traditions wells are endowed with a sacred character. They actualize in a kind of epitome of the three cosmic orders, Heaven, Earth and the Underworld, the three elements of Water, Earth and Air, and are a life-giving channel of

²⁴⁶ Emig, *Modernism in Poetry*, 38. Emig references Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Noonday, 1968) 38.

²⁴⁷ Preminger, *Poetic Terms*, 273.

²⁴⁸ Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (Williamsburg, Mass.: Paris, 1996) 39.

communication."²⁴⁹ Throughout her career, Levertov is preoccupied with the possibility of such "communication." In the early poetry the speaker's desire for communication manifests in symbols such as the well, moon and stairwell. The well is my focus in this and the remaining chapters since it indicates the changes in Levertov's thinking regarding the kind of relationship with the world she believes to be possible during the different phases of her writing life.

Many harsh judgements of the early poetry have been put forward, including Richard Howard's condemnation of *The Double Image*. He pronounces the collection to be "a spineless and rather whining affair" and takes issue with "the unexplained but Audenesque title *The Double Image* (the real or outer aspects of things and the 'imagined' or inner vision; in this partition, the experiential surface receives much less than its due, and the emphasis is all on the visionary recital. The language cannot support the strain."²⁵⁰ Despite Howard's harsh tone, I do agree with his assertion that Levertov's language struggles to keep up with the visionary ambitions of the speaker. It is as though the language is being forced into submission by the poet's intentions. To his credit, Howard reads *The Double Image* as part of Levertov's "journey or ordeal upward through experience to knowledge"²⁵¹ and recognises that it forms only the beginning of a long creative exploration. Reflecting on the problems of *The Double Image*, he recognises Levertov's need "to get the effort of the ascent *inside* herself and enacted by her language, rather than by a heap of found symbols to which her language could be only applied."²⁵² He acknowledges the

²⁴⁹ "Well," *A Dictionary of Symbols*, ed. Jean Chavalier and Alain Gheerbrant, trans. John Buchanan-Brown (Oxford: Blackwell) 1994.

²⁵⁰ Richard Howard, "Denise Levertov: 'I Don't Want to Escape, Only to See the Enactment of Rites,'" *Alone With America: The Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950* (London: Thames, 1969) 294.

²⁵¹ Howard, "Denise Levertov," 296.

²⁵² Howard, "Denise Levertov," 296.

transformation of Levertov's poetry upon her arrival in the United States, and recognises that shifting "the effort of the ascent *inside* herself and enacted by her language" is precisely the change in Levertov's poetics that accompanies her relocation.

In 1957, two years after Levertov was naturalized as a citizen of the United States, the book of poems, *Here and Now* was published. It is a transitional book which marks a change in Levertov's poetics from a concern with ordering the relationship one has with the world into formal, traditional aesthetic structures to an eagerness to experiment with different forms. At this point, Levertov subscribed to Williams's famous creed, "[n]o ideas but in things," which attempts to undermine the notion of a separation between thinking and the world. Levertov first read Williams in Paris in 1950 and 1951 in between leaving Britain and emigrating to the United States.²⁵³ From this time forward she draws upon Williams's techniques, especially the use of enjambment or the linebreak, incorporating them into her own poetics and poetry. Williams believes that poetry must be intimate with the realities of people's lives: it must contain rather than describe the rhythms of people's activities, speech and thinking. He sees the language of daily life as a rich source of new material upon which literature can draw: "It is there, in the mouths of the living, that the language is changing and giving new means for expanded possibilities in literary expression."²⁵⁴ Donald Markos writes that "Williams' attempt to incorporate American speech rhythms and antipoetic diction into his poetry was part of the general movement — influenced by realism in fiction and by the modernist mistrust of abstractions — to bring

²⁵³ John Lowney, "Pure Products': Imitation, Affiliation, and the Politics of Female Creativity in Denise Levertov's Poetry," *The American Avant-Garde Tradition: William Carlos Williams, Postmodern Poetry, and the Politics of Cultural Memory* (London: Associated UP, 1997) 76-7.

²⁵⁴ William Carlos Williams, "The Poem as a Field of Action," *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random, 1954) 291.

poetry closer to the physical and emotional realities of modern life."²⁵⁵ Levertov was "part of the general movement" in this direction. John Lowney asserts that in *Here and Now* and *Overland to the Islands* Levertov "consciously imitated Williams's characteristic vision, diction, and lineation."²⁵⁶ However, my reading suggests that the poetry in *Here and Now* begins to demonstrate Levertov's awareness of Williams's poetic techniques mainly in its use of enjambment. *Overland to the Islands*, on the other hand, incorporates other aspects of Williams's "lineation" plus a greater sensitivity to the "vision" and "diction" involved in his perception of the rhythms of human life in America. Although at this point in her career Levertov imitates some of Williams's poetic techniques, her poetry is not a copy of Williams's. As Lowney asserts, "[m]ost critics have agreed that even Levertov's 1950s poems that most resemble Williams reveal a greater emphasis on the poet's emotional, psychic involvement with her subject matter than on the 'things themselves.'"²⁵⁷ This is not to say, however, that Williams is primarily concerned with structure and technique, while Levertov is concerned only with the deeper involvement of the poet in the world. The influence of Williams upon Levertov can be seen in her thinking as much as her technique. When asked by Nicholas O'Connell, "[d]oes your emphasis on a metaphysical dimension in poetry distinguish your work from that of William Carlos Williams?" she replies that "[t]here is more of such a dimension in his poetry than many readers and critics have noticed. They get stuck on that damned red wheelbarrow and those stupid plums and they never look any further."²⁵⁸ Evidently, Williams's influence extends well beyond matters of imagery, and

²⁵⁵ Donald W. Markos, *Ideas in Things: The Poems of William Carlos Williams* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1994) 81.

²⁵⁶ Lowney, "Pure Products," 82.

²⁵⁷ Lowney, "Pure Products," 79.

²⁵⁸ Nicholas O'Connell, *At the Field's End: Interviews with 22 Pacific Northwest Writers* (Seattle: University of Washington P, 1998) 343.

although I will not enter into an extended comparison between the thinking of the two poets, it seems to me natural that an affinity of thinking would accompany an affinity of style.

Levertov describes the changes that her contact with Williams brought about in her poetry: "Williams showed me the way, made me listen, made me begin to appreciate the vivid and figurative language sometimes heard from ordinary present-day people, and the fact that even when vocabulary was impoverished there was some energy to be found in the here and now."²⁵⁹ The fact that Williams's poetry encourages Levertov to "listen" and appreciate the "energy to be found in the here and now" indicates that Williams's influence is not merely technical. His language-sensitive interaction with the world provides Levertov with an example of interrelatedness. Markos writes, "[i]n *A Noveletter and Other Prose*, Williams speaks of a 'singleness I see in everything . . . all things enter into the singleness of the moment and the moment partakes of the diversity of all things.' . . . The interrelatedness of things in nature is perceived, in special moments, as evidence of a harmony underlying the variety and flux of the universe."²⁶⁰ Williams's example of a poet who is not from America, coming to the country and sharing his vision of both "singleness" and "the diversity of all things" is particularly helpful for Levertov in the late 1950s when she negotiates life in her new American culture.

Williams communicates his vision of interrelatedness in language that attempts to connect the poet's thinking processes with the thing perceived. In this way the poet tries to avoid imposing his perception upon things. He attempts instead to appreciate things as autonomous while recognising them in the context of their relationship with other things, including the poet. In a discussion about some poets whose work is

²⁵⁹ Levertov, "Some Duncan Letters — A Memoir and Critical Tribute," 1979, *LUC*, 201.

primarily individual emotional expression, Levertov stresses poetry's capacity for both "emotional, psychic involvement" and objectivity: "I always feel that what such people should be doing, if they really want to be poets, is writing objectively. Writing about a chair, a tree outside their window. So much more of themselves really would get into the poem, than when they just say 'I'."²⁶¹ Levertov encourages poets to be involved emotionally and psychically but she urges them to shape this involvement in language that is objective rather than expressive. *Here and Now* and, to a greater extent, *Overland to the Islands* enact this emphasis upon "writing objectively."

The influence of Williams upon Levertov is particularly obvious in her emphasis upon objectivity. Williams was loosely connected with some other 1930s poets, including Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen, who were later grouped together with others and given the name "Objectivists." As Michael Heller outlines, the term "objectivist"

seemed to have adhered, *ex post facto*, so to speak, to these poets, who were aligned, accidentally and coincidentally, by friendship, correspondence, proximity,²⁶² publishing ventures (TO Press), and a sharing of broad mutual interests, such as the urban experience, politics, the influence and example of Pound and Williams (this group's 'older generation'), and possibly the solitariness each may have felt was his or her portion, working as they did in mutual obscurity and distance from the academy and its enthusiasm and concerns.²⁶³

Far from being a fledgling poet, Williams was an "influence and example" for the younger objectivists. However, given that connections between these objectivists occurred "accidentally and coincidentally," and that they wrote in "mutual obscurity," it is very difficult to formulate an adequate

²⁶⁰ Markos, *Ideas in Things*, 179.

²⁶¹ Levertov, "Denise Levertov," Interview with David Ossman, 1963, *Brooker, Conversations*, 2.

²⁶² Michael Heller's footnote reads, "[i]n the case of Oppen, Reznikoff and Zukofsky, this was mainly New York and the New Jersey of William Carlos Williams." Heller, *Conviction's Net of Branches: Essays on the Objectivist Poets and Poetry* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1985) xi.

definition of objectivism. While I do not want to dwell on this difficulty I will attempt to sketch the significance of objectivism for Williams so that his influence upon Levertov, particularly with regard to "writing objectively," can be better understood.

A number of poets were published, and thus grouped, together in the 1932 collection entitled *An 'Objectivists' Anthology* and in books published from 1933 to 1936 by The Objectivist Press.²⁶⁴ Eleanor Berry identifies some of these poets and defines "Objectivism"²⁶⁵ as,

that part of American poetry (1) which has not followed in the tradition of symbolism but has developed out of imagism; (2) which presents concrete objects not in order to convey abstract ideas but for the sake of their sensuous qualities and haecceity; (3) which reflects the poet's primary interest in composing a structure of relationships apprehensible as a whole, rather than in offering interpretations of experience; and (4) which uses language more literally than figuratively. The poets most frequently associated with Objectivism are Zukofsky (1904-78), George Oppen (1908-84), Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976), Carl Rakosi (b. 1903), Lorine Niedecker (1903-70); also the English poet Basil Bunting (1900-85). The American modernists W.C. Williams and Ezra Pound were also affiliated with the younger objectivists for part of their careers.

Since these poets differ widely from each other and since, though most of them had personal ties to each other, they never worked together as a group, it is not surprising that some critics have denied that Objectivism was a movement at all. Zukofsky himself denied the existence of Objectivism as a movement; the term he coined was 'objectivist,' which he meant to designate only individual poets.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ Heller, *Conviction's Net*, xi.

²⁶⁴ Eleanor Berry, "Objectivism," *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 848-9.

²⁶⁵ Objectivism in poetry is different from the philosophy of "objectivism," also referred to as "ethical objectivism." In philosophy the term refers to "the view that the objects of the most basic concepts of ethics (which may be supposed to be values, obligations, duties, oughts, rights, or what not) exist, or that facts about them hold, objectively and that similarly worded ethical statements by different persons make the same factual claims (and thus do not concern merely the speaker's feelings)." T.L.S. Sprigge, "Objectivism," *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi, 2nd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999). "Objectivism" in poetry and in philosophy overlap broadly in their concern with objective, factual, concrete evidence. This discussion does not investigate the two fields of enquiry but confines itself to consideration of "Objectivism" in poetry.

²⁶⁶ Berry, "Objectivism," 849.

Although Zukofsky — who was the first to refer to some poetry as “objectivist” — himself “denied the existence of Objectivism as a movement,” commentators and poets have shown great interest in the significance of objectivist poetry to thinking about language and art. For example, Berry reflects that “[i]f one generalization could be made about all the objectivists, it would probably be that they sought to ‘think with things as they exist’ (Zukofsky’s phrase), to extend the principles of imagism²⁶⁷ while retaining its respect for things and for craft, and to allow thought and history into the poem.”²⁶⁸ Imagism — which is characterised by a “desire for the immediacy of effect that arises from the closest possible association of word and object”²⁶⁹ — is continuous with objectivism in its “attempt to create a poem as a single entity which, unlike a symbolic or allegorical poem, intensifies its objective reality rather than expressing the subjective feelings of the poet.”²⁷⁰ While there are differences between imagism and objectivism,²⁷¹ they both depart from “symbolic or allegorical” poetry. This is an important similarity for

²⁶⁷ See Stanley K. Coffman, “Imagism,” *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. According to Coffman, “Imagism” refers to “[a] school of poetry which flourished in England and America between 1912 and 1914 and emphasized the virtues of clarity, compression, and precision” (574). He writes that “[t]he climax of the movement came in the Spring of 1914, when Pound published in England and America an anthology of verse entitled *Des Imagistes*, which included poems by H.D., Richard Aldington, F.S. Flint, Amy Lowell, James Joyce, and William Carlos Williams. By this time, Lowell was assuming leadership of the movement and began publishing anthologies entitled *Some Imagist Poets* for the years 1915-17” (574). Coffman draws a parallel between the aims of Imagists and the Romantic poets: “Imagism reacted against the verbose and abstract language into which much of the poetry of the 19th century had declined. As a movement it thus parallels the romantic reaction a century earlier against the ossified poetic diction of neoclassicism. Its concentration on the object and realistic rendering of the external world recall similar principles in Wordsworth’s ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads*” (574).

²⁶⁸ Berry, “Objectivism,” 849.

²⁶⁹ Coffman, “Imagism,” 574.

²⁷⁰ Coffman, “Imagism,” 574.

²⁷¹ Coffman, “Imagism.” Coffman highlights the fact that “the imagist movement has more complex associations: its preoccupation with technique and with surfaces, light, and colour links it with impressionism; and Pound’s concept of ‘presentation’ recalls Henry James’s insistence that the writer should ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’ . . . The essential point about the influence and importance of imagism was made by Stephen Spender: ‘the aims of the imagist movement in poetry provide the archetype of a modern creative procedure’” (574). Spender is quoted from *The Struggle of the Modern* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963) 110.

Williams who is classified, in his early days, as an imagist and later an objectivist. In a critique of Ezra Pound, written in 1931, Williams summarises "the principal move in imaginative writing today," declaring that it is a movement "away from the word as a symbol towards the word as reality."²⁷² In Levertov's poetry the move from "symbol" to "reality" begins with the publication of *Here and Now*.²⁷³

Like the symbol of the well in *The Double Image*, the well in *Here and Now* revolves around the possibility of a connection between inner and outer worlds. Levertov's emphasis upon language as a kind of sear in

²⁷² Williams, *Selected Essays* (New York: Random, 1954) 107.

²⁷³ See Heller, *Conviction's Net*. With reference to Oppen and George Lukacs, Heller discusses objective writing in the context of love, uncertainty and desire. According to Heller, Oppen perceives that the poem's "form is closer to love than intellectual dominance. Thus, the sense of conviction which it bears emerges not out of the older, human-centred sense of mastery of experience, a kind of humanist arrogance, but out of its show of vulnerability, out of the poet's willingness to enter experience disarmed and to relinquish the dictates or niceties of form when form threatens the sincerity of expression. As in the throes of love, the poet not only breaks with received forms (in this case, of the poem) but with the form of his own mind-set, his self-image as poet" (103). Heller asks, "[h]ow then are we to understand in the light of this sense of uncertainty . . . the ultimate goal or attainment of the Objectivist poem." In his attempt to answer this question he suggests that "[w]e can perhaps take a clue from George Lukacs' remarks on the notion of 'composition' in *Soul and Form*. A 'composition,' Lukacs tells us, is something 'you cannot enter into. you cannot come to terms with it in the usual way. Our relationship to a composition — to something that has already taken form — is clear and unambiguous, even if it is enigmatic and difficult to explain: it is the feeling of being both near and far which comes with great understanding, that profound sense of union which is yet eternally a being-separate, a standing outside. It is a state of longing'" (105). Lukacs is quoted from Lukacs, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anne Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 1971) 91-2. Heller concludes his book with the assertion that the objectivist poem "engenders longing — and here the poem is nearly a stand-in for its poet — because, like persons, it arouses the attractive possibilities of uncertainty and desire. And like these possibilities, it is ever alive, ever capable of evoking one's creativity, of evoking the deep transformations which are at the center of life and poetic art" (106). It seems that objectivist poetry is sustained by a faith in the possibility of language as an experience and not only a signpost pointing in the direction of experience. Heller writes that "[w]ords are real, in the Objectivist formulation, because they instate an existence beyond the words. They are an expression of a 'faith' — as Oppen speaks of it in describing his own poetics — 'that the nouns do refer to something; that it's there, that it's true'" (4). Oppen is quoted from "The 'Objectivist' Poet: Four Interviews," *Contemporary Literature* 10.2 (1969) 163.

Clearly, the relation between experience and faith is a preoccupation for poets as well as philosophers and theorists. I suppose this is because language is inescapably an experience of simultaneous abundance and emptiness. In language, being and meaning gaze desiringly at one another, achieving neither union nor separation and, at the same time, realising them both.

which human thoughts and emotions come together with things in the world reflects Williams's preoccupation with things that have a life within and outside poetry.²⁷⁴ However, the well in this collection begins to be a place in which connection can be experienced rather than merely represented symbolically.

"Everything that Acts Is Actual" describes the well as a dwelling place for the imagination and the moon.²⁷⁵ When the imagination journeys to "the bottom of the well where the moon lives" it discovers what lies beyond it:

From the tawny light
 from the rainy nights
 from the imagination finding
 itself and more than itself
 alone and more than alone
 at the bottom of the well where the moon lives,
 can you pull me

into December? a lowland
 of space, perception of space
 towering of shadows of clouds blown upon
 clouds over

new ground, new made
 under heavy December footsteps? the only
 way to live?

The flawed moon
 acts on the truth, and makes
 an autumn of tentative
 silences.
 You lived, but somewhere else,
 your presence touched others, ring upon ring,
 and changed. Did you think
 I would not change?

The black moon
 turns away, its work done. A tenderness,
 unspoken autumn.
 We are faithful
 only to the imagination. What the

²⁷⁴ In this book the influence of other American poets is evident. After Levertov's move to America, her biggest influences, apart from Williams, are Charles Olson and Robert Duncan.

²⁷⁵ Levertov, "Here and Now," 1957, Levertov, *CEP*, 43-4.

imagination
 seizes
 as beauty must be truth. What holds you
 to what you see of me is
 that grasp alone.

Drawing on Keats's dictum, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," from his "Ode On a Grecian Urn" the speaker witnesses a connection between her imagination and "truth." She observes that truth is a matter of perception which is guided by the imagination and she thus reveres the imagination as one might worship God. She declares "[w]e are faithful / only to the imagination." This faithfulness is explored in the parallel between the imagination and the moon.

The imagination in this poem is located "at the bottom of the well where the moon lives." The moon occurs both as "the flawed moon" which "acts on the truth, and makes / an autumn of tentative / silences" and "the black moon" which leaves behind "a tenderness, / unspoken autumn." The human imagination and the moon are brought together both in the image of the well and in the poem's implicit comparison between the declaration "*[w]hat the imagination / seizes / as beauty must be truth*" and the fact that the "flawed moon" also "acts on truth." The strong emphasis in this poem on the mirroring of human perception in the surrounding world is reminiscent of Levertov's British poems. However, its style is notably different, particularly in its use of enjambment. In 1979, Levertov writes that "[t]he forms more apt to express the sensibility of our age are the exploratory, open ones."²⁷⁶ She writes about poetry that "incorporates and reveals the process of thinking/feeling, feeling/thinking" and believes that the linebreak is the key to having this process occur in language: "the crucial precision tool for creating this exploratory mode is the linebreak. The most obvious function of the linebreak is rhythmic: it can record the

²⁷⁶ Levertov, "On the Function of the Line," 1979, *NSE*, 79.

slight (but meaningful) hesitations between word and word that are characteristic of the mind's dance among perceptions but which are not noted by grammatical punctuation."²⁷⁷ The "rhythmic" language created by linebreaks evokes the mind's perception of things. This deliberate alignment of thought and language is an attempt by Levertov to avoid privileging thinking over language, as though language happens after thinking and is subservient to it.

The "slight hesitations between word and word that are characteristic of the mind's dance among perceptions" occur throughout the poetry from this point on. The "mind's dance among perceptions" is a good description of what occurs in "Everything that Acts is Actual"²⁷⁸ given the way the poem jumps from a consideration of the moon and the well to a declaration about truth and then to an association between truth, beauty and the imagination. Four questions make up half of the poem, creating a sense that the mind wanders or dances "among perceptions." The second question, for example, is arranged into a series of phrases that appear as individual images or perceptions:

a lowland
of space, perception of space
towering of shadows of clouds blown upon
clouds over
new ground, new made
under heavy December footsteps?

The initial impression of "a lowland" is followed in the next line with the elaboration, "of space, perception of space." The repetition in these lines is echoed in later repetitions of sound and word. Long vowel sounds suggest the clouds' shape and make the ground beneath seem continuous with them: "towering of shadows of clouds blown upon / clouds over / new ground, new made." The repetition of "clouds" and "new" indicate that

²⁷⁷ Levertov, "On the Function of the Line," *NSE*, 79.

²⁷⁸ Levertov, "Here and Now," Levertov, *CEP*, 43-4.

what is occurring might not be simple description but the speaker's actual thinking. Enjambment further loosens the grammatical connections between words thereby reinforcing the effect of thinking that is taking place in language. This effect culminates with the conclusion that knowing can take place through the imagination: "*What the / imagination / seizes / as beauty must be truth. What holds you / to what you see of me is / that grasp alone.*" Just as the imagination enables access to the truth, Levertov's linebreaks help us witness the speaker's "grasp" of events.

Enjambment is also employed in Levertov's next book of poems, *Overland to the Islands* (1958) and throughout the rest of the poetry. In both *Overland to the Islands* and the next book, *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961) the well is no longer a symbol but an image that is evidence of the connection between the speaker and the world. The poems in these collections present the image of the well as an event in itself rather than a symbol that merely gestures towards meaning.

Human grief is explored in "The Bereaved."²⁷⁹ The poem revolves around "the black well-hole" image. From the outset the speaker is aware of the impossibility of speaking: "Could not speak / could not speak / no meeting was possible." The meeting refers to the meeting between the speaker and the dead children. There is also the suggestion that "no meeting was possible" because of the frustration involved in trying to make sense, in language, of the experiences of death and grief. While "no meeting was possible" between the speaker and the children, the same can be said of the attempt to give the experience of death expression in language. The "well-hole" or the "abyss" concentrates these impossibilities: it is a focal point around which the speaker's unanswered questions circulate:

²⁷⁹ The entire poem is in Appendix III.

distance on the page between the fact of the speaker's "[s]tanding there" and her perception of the mysterious departure. The linebreak does not sever the two activities but opens a gap in between them so that the speaker's thoughts incorporate events that she cannot grasp. In "The Bereaved," the speaker's fear of the well is overlaid with a curiosity that draws her into a more intimate relationship with what she perceives and wishes to discover.

I want to include in this discussion of *Overland to the Islands* a poem called "One A.M." To my mind, the poem signals the full emergence of the objective image in Levertov's poetry:

The kitchen patio in snowy
 moonlight. That
 snowsilence, that
 abandon to stillness.
 The sawhorse, the concrete
 washtub, snowblue. The washline
 bowed under its snowfur!
 Moon has silenced
 the crickets, the summer frogs
 hold their breath.
 Summer night, summer night, standing
 one-legged, a crane
 in the snowmarsh, staring
 at snowmoon!²⁸⁰

To speak of elements of this poem is difficult because its power arises out of the interconnectedness of its parts. The speaker communicates a deathless serenity through the use of connected images. For example, the cluster of lines, "sawhorse, the concrete / washtub, snowblue. The washline / bowed under its snowfur!" links images together in an associative chain and separates them through the use of linebreaks. The effect is a kind of haiku formality that releases the energy of its carefully

²⁸⁰ Levertov, "Overland to the Islands," Levertov, *CEP*, 76. The book title is in inverted commas because — although it was originally published as a separate book and therefore can be signalled in the text with italics — it now appears as a section in Levertov's *CEP*.

ordered components.

"One A.M." is a journey into the space between the speaker and her surrounding world. The structure in Levertov's poetry which most consistently highlights, critiques and recreates this place is the well image. Lowney identifies in a handful of poems, including "The Whirlwind" and "The Palm Trees" from *Overland to the Islands*, Levertov's use of images of "enclosure" and "release." He views these images as the poetry's way of working through the slippery territory of subject and object relations:

Such patterns of enclosure and release typically resolve themselves not by simply affirming the immanent presence of the material world, as many of Levertov's critics claim, nor by simply affirming the poet's power to imaginatively order the world. Instead, these patterns frequently reach their unstable resolutions by reflecting on how subject-object relations are mediated, whether by the physical structures (the window, the wall) dividing/joining inside and outside, or the formal structures dividing/joining the poet and her intertexts.²⁸¹

Given Lowney's interest in the structures involved in "dividing/joining inside and outside" it is surprising that he does not study the image of the well since it is the most salient image in Levertov's poetry of the meeting of "inside and outside" and of "enclosure" and "release." His comments do, however, bring to light the fact that the well is a valuable indicator of change in Levertov's poetry. For example, *The Double Image* and, to some extent, *Here and Now* are concerned with the interaction between inner and outer worlds or, as Lowney puts it, the "relations of subject and object."²⁸² However, changes in the image of the well in the remaining poetry demonstrate an increasing concern with the relationship, between the poet and the world, conceived as space rather than a boundary set up by theoretical oppositions such as inner-outer and subject-object.

²⁸¹ Lowney, "Pure Products," 96.

²⁸² Lowney, "Pure Products," 86.

As in *Overland to the Islands*, the poems in *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961) embody a connection between perception and the objective world. However, *The Jacob's Ladder* introduces language into the equation: the well not only serves as a place of connection between the speaker's perceptions and the surrounding world but it also draws attention to itself as a space in which language is experienced. For example, "The Well"²⁸³ and "The Illustration"²⁸⁴ feature a well from which the Muse originates.

In "The Well" poetic inspiration, in the form of the Muse, arises out of the watery depths shared by spring, lake, stream and river. The "deep water" and the spring "below the lake's surface" are felt but not seen:

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

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

The "bridge" allows the speaker to perceive the Muse's movements. The structure of the bridge is akin to the structures of language that belie hidden elements. This is reinforced by the fact that the Muse, who "wades into deep water," resembles Miss Annie Sullivan, the teacher who helped reveal to Helen Keller the connection between the word "water" and the *thing* water. Word and thing originate from the same place and both are equally involved in the speaker's discovery of their connectedness:

²⁸³ Levertov, *P*, 40-1.

²⁸⁴ Levertov, *P*, 42.

She stoops
 to gently dip and deep enough.
 Her face resembles
 the face of the young actress who played
 Miss Annie Sullivan, she who
 spelled the word 'water' into the palm
 of Helen Keller, opening
 the doors of the world.

In the baroque park,
 transformed as I neared the water
 to Valentines, a place of origin,
 I stand on a bridge of one span
 and see this calm act, this gathering up
 of life, of spring water

and the Muse gliding then
 in her barge without sails, without
 oars or motor, across
 the dark lake, and I know
 no interpretation of these mysteries
 although I know she is the Muse
 and that the humble
 tributary of Roding is
 one with Alpheus, the god who as a river
 flowed through the salt sea to his love's well

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

The "place of origin" — the spring "below the lake's surface" — is hidden from view. Any distance that vision might set up between a perceiving subject and a perceived object dissolves and words are experienced, in the tradition of Williams, along with the things of the world: "Cold, fresh, deep, I feel the word 'water' / spelled in my left palm." Language in this poem is more than capable of "opening / the doors of the world."

"A Common Ground"²⁸⁵ also connects words and things. Levertov imagines eating "vegetable words": "To crunch on words / grown in grit or fine / crumbling earth, sweet / to eat and sweet / to be given, to be eaten /

²⁸⁵ Levertov, *P*, 3-5.

in common, by laborer / and hungry wanderer".²⁸⁶ Here language nurtures community. Poetry in particular is experienced as part of the substance of an ordinary day as well as a valuable source of life and energy:

... Poems stirred
 into paper coffee-cups, eaten
 with petals on rye in the
 sun — the cold shadows in back,
 and the traffic grinding the
 borders of spring — entering
 human lives forever,
 unobserved, a spring element...²⁸⁷

While poems are "stirred / into paper coffee-cups" and "eaten / with petals on rye," they are also "unobserved." Like the gliding of the Muse, a poem's capacity for "entering / human lives forever" cannot be contained by vision. The epigraph to *part iii* of "A Common Ground" is a quotation from Boris Pasternak which reads "...everything in the world must / excel itself to be itself."²⁸⁸ There is a clue in this epigraph, and in the poem that it precedes, about what is unseen in poetry and experience:

Not 'common speech'
 a dead level
 but the uncommon speech of paradise,
 tongue in which oracles
 speak to beggars and pilgrims:

not illusion but what Whitman called
 'the path
 between reality and the soul,'
 a language
 excelling itself to be itself,

speech akin to the light
 with which at day's end and day's
 renewal, mountains
 sing to each other across the cold valleys.²⁸⁹

When a thing excels itself the movement is horizontal like the singing of mountains "across the cold valleys." This horizontal movement results not

²⁸⁶ Levertov, *P*, 3.

²⁸⁷ Levertov, *P*, 4.

²⁸⁸ Levertov, *P*, 5.

²⁸⁹ Levertov, *P*, 5.

in a thing losing itself but in becoming itself. How, then, are we to understand the movement of excelling? If a thing becomes itself through excelling itself — here it is “language / excelling itself to be itself” — then there needs to be a way of understanding this movement away and back. For Levertov, poetry involves a constant movement out and back between the self and the world. Whitman’s “path / between reality and the soul” is a recognition of one’s intimacy with the world. Although the concluding words of “The Jacob’s Ladder” are “the poem ascends,” the connection between the speaker and heaven takes place in the “stone” of the speaker’s world. By way of concluding this chapter I will discuss two poems in which transcendence occurs horizontally.

In a series of interconnected images, “To The Reader” depicts poems (including itself) as intimate with things in the world:

As you read, a white bear leisurely
pees, dyeing the snow
saffron,

and as you read, many gods
lie among lianas: eyes of obsidian
are watching the generations of leaves,

and as you read
the sea is turning its dark pages,
turning
its dark pages.²⁹⁰

These images, as though chosen at random, lend their rhythms to the reading. They interact like the mountains that sing to one another in “A Common Ground.” For Levertov, poetry is not something that can be traced using fixed coordinates. Rather, poetry takes place in unlikely places and at odd moments. It is impossible to predict its movements or reduce its meaning to a theoretical formulation. And a reader’s experience of a poem occurs not through speculation about the poem but through

²⁹⁰ Levertov, *P*, 1.

immersion in it. While a reader who speculates remains untouched, a reader who becomes immersed in the poem cannot help but be transformed by the experience. The event of simultaneous immersion and transformation is dealt with in "The Illustration":

Months after the Muse
had come and gone across the lake of vision,
arose out of childhood the long-familiar
briefly forgotten presaging of her image —

'The Light of Truth' — frontispiece
to 'Parables from Nature,' 1894 — a picture
intending another meaning than that which it gave
(for I never read the story until now)

intending to represent Folly
sinking into a black bog, but for me having meant
a mystery, of darkness, of beauty, of serious
dreaming pause and intensity

where not a will-o'-the-wisp but
a star come to earth burned before the
closed all-seeing eyes
of that figure later seen as the Muse.

By which I learn to affirm
Truth's light at strange turns of the mind's road,
wrong turns that lead
over the border into wonder,

mistaken directions, forgotten signs
all bringing the soul's travels to a place
of origin, a well
under the lake where the Muse moves.

The speaker's "wrong turns," "mistaken directions" and "forgotten signs" do not represent a failure. Rather, in these unintentional journeys she recognises a freedom in reading and, in this case, misreading. Like the Muse's ability to see with "closed all-seeing eyes," the reader perceives "forgotten signs" that gesture beyond themselves to "a place / of origin, a well / under the lake where the Muse moves." While the analogy of misreading highlights her unintentional discovery of things, the image of

the well embodies her experience of the "mystery," "darkness" and "beauty" of the journey. The remaining two chapters discuss how this experience is embodied in the image of the well in Levertov's middle and late poems.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Well of Desire

I

This chapter deals with a selection of poems from *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970), *To Stay Alive* (1971), *Footprints* (1972), *The Freeing of the Dust* (1975) and *Life in the Forest* (1978). In this eight year period the well develops from a descriptive structure into an autonomous image or "thing." This transformation reflects Levertov's deepening relationship with language and the world around her. In this chapter and the next I focus particularly on the changes in the image cluster and structure of feeling that I have been identifying around the concept of "the well." The five collections to be discussed represent the middle-phase of Levertov's career, a time during which her poetics transforms from a set of opinions about poetry into a steady belief in poetry as praxis. A parallel, in Levertov's poetry, for such transformation is found in the speaker's experience in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" from *Relearning the Alphabet*. As already discussed, listening is a central activity in Levertov's poetry because it creates the conditions for change to take place, as demonstrated in the relationship of the poet and the reader with the world around them. "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" is testimony to the energy exchange or the change in chemistry that, for Levertov, is brought about by listening. The second half of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of this poem and its implications for thinking about poetry as a site of desire and relationship.

As mentioned previously, many of the poems in *Relearning the Alphabet* have an overt political theme. While a conceptual connection between the well and poetry is not explicit in this collection, the well image nevertheless appears in a couple of poems, "Not Yet" and "Adam's Complaint." In both poems the physical presence of the well provides hope in the midst of war and need. Despite the fact that, in "Not Yet," the well goes dry, its enduring structure preserves the possibility of sustenance not only in the future but in the present:

A stealth in air that means:

the swallows have flown
south while I flew
north again.

Still, in the quiet there are
chickadees,
to make me grudgingly smile,
and crickets curious about
my laundry put out to bleach
on brown grass.

So do I smile.
What else to do?
Melancholy is boring.

And if the well goes dry —
and it has;
and if the body-count goes up —
and it does;
and if the summer spent
itself before I took it
into my life — ?

Nothing to do but take
crumbs that fall from the chickadee's table
— or starve.
But the time for starving is not yet.²⁸¹

The poem's major preoccupation is whether there is a chance for survival in the face of war. The reader is confronted with a series of losses: "if the well goes dry — / and it has; / and if the body-count goes up — / and it

does; / and if the summer spent / itself before I took it / into my life — ?” Despite the fact that these events have already happened, the last stanza changes direction and opens a space of possibility for an alternative view of events. The speaker decides that she will “take / crumbs that fall from the chickadee’s table.” She salvages what it is possible to salvage and although the poem describes bleak events it ends on an affirming note with, “the time for starving is not yet.” The title of the poem is repeated in the final words, “not yet,” emphasising the chance for survival rather than defeat. Even when the well goes dry it is still not the end of the world: its enduring presence is a reminder that sustenance of some kind is always possible.

Along similar lines, “Adam’s Complaint” features a well that functions to preserve the possibility of abundance in the face of disaster and despair. The speaker points to the tendency for some people to believe that their needs exceed what the world can offer. The well is a reservoir that is frequently overlooked:

Some people,
no matter what you give them,
still want the moon.

The bread,
the salt,
white meat and dark,
still hungry.

The marriage bed
and the cradle,
still empty arms.

You give them land,
their own earth under their feet,
still they take to the roads.

And water: dig them the deepest well,
still it’s not deep enough
to drink the moon from.

The concern here is with the power of perception to change a person's situation. In this case, "some people" are blind to the well's possibilities because of their own intense longings. The well is a chance for them to choose to perceive plenitude or destitution. In "Everything that Acts is Actual" the well is "where the moon lives." Images of height and depth come together in the well, suggesting that apparently distant things can occur together. The speaker in "Not Yet" perceives the possibility of this occurring despite perceptions to the contrary. In her view, the well is deep enough to drink the moon from. Her perception that the solid well and the luminous moon can be discovered together leads to her belief that "the time for starving is not yet." In the next couple of poems this sustaining view of the well's possibilities continues, particularly in relation to the making of poetry.

While an association between the well image and language was initiated in *The Jacob's Ladder*, it is not until *To Stay Alive* that the connection begins to occur in each successive collection. The ninth and final poem in the sequence entitled "Part III" is a beautiful evocation of the transformative power of poetry.²⁸² The poem takes place as a memory of a dialogue that occurred in Britain, presumably the Britain of Levertov's youth. The well is imagined as a poem: "[g]et down into your well, / it's your well / go deep into it / into your own depth as into a poem." These words are part of a larger dialogue spoken by a figure named Bet:

Bet said:
There was a dream I dreamed always
over and over,

a tunnel
and I in it, distraught

and great dogs blocking
each end of it
and I thought I must

²⁸² Levertov, *TSA*, 71-2.

always go on
dreaming that dream,
trapped there,

but Mrs Simon listened
and said

why don't you sit down
in the middle of the tunnel
quietly:

imagine yourself
quiet and intent sitting there,
not running from blocked
exit to blocked exit.

Make a place for yourself
in the darkness
and wait there. *Be* there.

The dogs
will not go away.
They must be transformed.

Dream it that way.
Imagine.

Your being, a fiery stillness,
is needed to TRANSFORM
the dogs.

And Bet said to me:
Get down into your well,

it's your well

go deep into it

into your own depth as into a poem.

The tunnel is a dark place from which there is no escape: the "exits" are not really exits since they are guarded by dogs. However, when Mrs Simon listens to Bet's anxieties a pathway is forged deeper into the imagination. While Bet does not physically exit the tunnel she is guided to a quiet place where she can "wait" and "*Be*." The way out of the tunnel proves to be a way of being and thinking rather than a physical path that

leads Bet outside. The speaker is advised to avoid "running from blocked / exit to blocked exit" and to enter the tunnel more deeply. Bet, in turn, listens to Mrs Simon, and suggests to the speaker (and to the reader) in four double-spaced lines: "[g]et down into your well, / it's your well / go deep into it / into your own depth as into a poem."

"Part IV" recalls the image of the well as it occurs in "Part III." The repetition of Bet's words reinforces the intimacy of the well and the writing of poetry:

... I go on
writing poems sometimes like shouting down a deep well,²⁸³
Those are the same lamps
of my dream of Olga — the eel or cockle stand,
she in the flare caught, a moment, her face
painted, clownishly, whorishly. Suffering.

'It's your own well.
Go down
into its depth.'²⁸³

The well is a source of strength for the speaker who approaches it quietly and without struggling: "[n]ow in midwinter / not doing much to struggle, or striving mainly / to get down into my well in hope / that force may gather in me / from being still in the grim / middle of the tunnel."²⁸⁴ As in "Adam's Complaint," the well is a structure that preserves the possibility of sustenance within one's own experience.

By the time *Footprints* appears, the well image occurs less as a structure than a space. "To Kevin O'Leary, Wherever He Is"²⁸⁵ features a space that is an "entrance, exit" vastly different from the tunnel's threatening "blocked exit" in "Part III." The central image is "Daleth," the fourth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which means "door" and has the shape of an open door:

²⁸³ Levertov, *TSA*, 76.

²⁸⁴ Levertov, *TSA*, 81.

²⁸⁵ Levertov, *F*, 26.

Steele describes Borges's labyrinths as "an inexhaustible reservoir for the refreshment of insight."²⁸⁸ Levertov's door and well images, and the relationship between them, illustrate the speaker's intimacy with "the transcendent." The door that opens out to the transcendent enables the perception of the well that reaches deep into the earth. This event of horizontal transcendence is precisely what makes the well "an inexhaustible reservoir for the refreshment of insight." The rest of this chapter deals with poetry that is itself an opening onto "the transcendent."

In *The Freeing of the Dust* the well occurs as a space that is discovered through a process of imaginative unlocking. "Cancion," the Spanish word for "song," celebrates a woman's creativity:

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

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

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

When I am a woman — O, when I am
a woman,
my wells of salt brim and brim,
poems force the lock of my throat.²⁸⁹

The speaker imagines being "the sky," "the sea" and "the earth," and in each case she comes under attack: "a glittering bird / slashes at me with knives of song"; "fiery clouds plunge into my mirrors, / fracture my smooth breath"; "I feel my flesh of rock wearing down." Her human "breath" and "flesh" are easily broken and eroded. However, when she imagines being a woman she discovers a power within herself that

²⁸⁸ Peter Steele, *Expatriates: Reflections on Modern Poetry* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1985) 27.

²⁸⁹ Levertov, *FD*, 49.

culminates in her own song: "my wells of salt brim and brim, / poems force the lock of my throat." The wells unlock the speaker's capacity to express herself, connecting her with the surrounding world. Like the well in "Part III" and "Part IV," these wells are a reminder that the speaker's power originates from within her own experience. When she goes down into her own well she throws off the restrictions which until now have kept her silent: "[w]hen I am a woman — O, when I am / a woman, / my wells of salt brim and brim, poems force the lock of my throat." Directing imagination inward affects a joyful release of voice and energy.

A process of imaginative unlocking also occurs in "The Poem Rising By Its Own Weight."²⁹⁰ The images of "a dark hole" and "the cave" are, like the well, spaces in which transformation occurs:

The poet is at the disposal of his own night.
Jean Cocteau

The singing robes fly onto your body and cling there silkily,
you step out on the rope and move unfalteringly across it,

and seize the fiery knives unscathed and
keep them spinning above you, a fountain
of rhythmic rising, falling, rising
flames,

and proudly let the chains
be wound about you, ready
to shed them, link by steel link,
padlock by padlock —

... but when your graceful
confident shrug and twist drives the metal
into your flesh and the python grip of it tightens
and you see rust on the chains and blood in your pores
and you roll
over and down a steepness into a dark hole
and there is not even the sound of mockery in the distant air
somewhere above you where the sky was,
no sound but your own breath panting:
then it is that the miracle
walks in, on his swift feet,
down the precipice straight into the cave,

²⁹⁰ Levertov, *FD*, 92-3.

opens the locks,
 knots of chain fall open,
 twists of chain unwind themselves,
 links fall asunder,
 in seconds there is a heap of scrap-
 metal at your ankles, you step free and at once
 he turns to go —

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

holds you,

holds you

close and tenderly before he vanishes.

It is in the darkness of the "hole" and the "cave" that the speaker discovers the possibility of freedom. The epigraph gives a clue to the poem's central concern, that is, the conviction that a poet's experience is a kind of darkness that is both limiting and releasing. It is not the poet who "opens the locks." Rather, "the miracle / walks in, on his swift feet, / down the precipice straight into the cave." This mysterious presence "opens the locks" and "turns to go" in the same movement. He cannot be said to be entirely present nor entirely absent, yet his involvement utterly transforms the speaker's experience. What is this "miracle" that provides sustenance when everything is lost? The speaker of "Suspended" encounters a "void" and is "upheld." She feels "nothing" and yet she declares, "I have not plummeted." Similarly, in "The Poem Rising By Its Own Weight" the speaker witnesses a mysterious unnamed presence: "he turns to you, / and raises you to your feet, / and strokes your hair, / and holds you, / holds you, / holds you / close and tenderly before he vanishes." This also describes the experience of the poet: while a poem arises from her it is not entirely under her control. She is delivered to her own imagination by a mysterious, other power felt in the cracks (the "dark hole" and "cave"). Here imagination enables the perception of sustenance and freedom, even

in the face of deprivation and imprisonment. In fact, just as the "miracle" is felt to be present and absent at once, bondage and freedom are glimpsed as one.

Levertov comments on the crucial role of the imagination in creating positive change:

The action of imagination, if unsmothered, is to lift the crushed mind out from under the weight of affliction. The intellect by itself may point out the source of suffering; but the imagination illuminates it; by that light it becomes more comprehensible. It becomes a discrete entity, separate from the self. This is what I meant when I wrote that

To speak of sorrow
works upon it
 moves it from its
crouched place barring
the way to and from the soul's hall — ²⁹¹

In "A Poem Rising By Its Own Weight" the imagination serves to "lift the crushed mind out from under the weight of affliction." As the poem rises, the suffering mind lightens. It might sound as though the imagination is a psychological means of escape. However, the poem presents the imagination not as a way out of experience but as a way of paying close attention to it. Levertov points out that imagination is neither denial of nor extreme preoccupation with one's own experience:

Crass, complacent obliviousness to suffering obviously does not coexist with imagination — the insensitively cheerful are uncreative. But that does not mean that neurosis is the *sine qua non* for the operation of creative imagination. Neurosis saps energy while the creative imagination, itself not languid, demands energy in those it inhabits. Imagination is not anesthetic.²⁹²

The life of the imagination, then, is not a psychological defense but a dynamic state of being. It is different from both "obliviousness" and "anaesthetic" in the way it enables an individual to embrace rather than

²⁹¹ Levertov, "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," 145. The poem quoted is "To Speak" which is collected in Levertov, *P*, 213.

²⁹² Levertov, "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," *NSE*, 145.

deny their experience. For Levertov, an active imagination allows experience to be embraced. In "Wedding-Ring," for example, the speaker's imagination transforms potential despair into affirmation. The way forward is not discovered through denying events but through acceptance of them:

My wedding-ring lies in a basket
as if at the bottom of a well.
Nothing will come to fish it back up
and onto my finger again.

It lies
among keys to abandoned houses,
nails waiting to be needed and hammered
into some wall,
telephone numbers with no names attached,
idle paperclips.

It can't be given away
for fear of bringing ill-luck.

It can't be sold
for the marriage was good in its own
time, though that time is gone.

Could some artificer
beat into it bright stones, transform it
into a dazzling circlet no one could take
for solemn betrothal or to make promises
living will not let them keep? Change it
into a simple gift I could give in friendship?²⁹³

The "artificer" is the speaker who works with her imagination to "transform" events. *Life in the Forest*, in which this poem is collected, does not draw as explicit a link between the well image and poetry as *The Jacob's Ladder* and *To Stay Alive*. Rather, in this and the remaining collections the link is implicit. The subtle connection between the well and poetry from this point on indicates Levertov's new ability to convey thoughts and feelings without having to use symbols as signposts pointing to her meaning. This new relationship with language allows a certain give and take between the poet and language: she acknowledges the poem's autonomy and she receives something in the process of writing. As

²⁹³ Levertov, *LF*, 99.

Levertov states, to write is not only to create but also to be created. Another way of saying this is that giving and receiving occur together in the experience of poetry. When the poet writes of sorrow she is transformed by the experience: "[t]o speak of sorrow / works upon it / moves it from its / crouched place barring / the way to and from the soul's hall —". As discussed in the previous chapter, "Everything that Acts is Actual" (collected in *Here and Now*) features a well that houses the imagination and the moon. In "Wedding-Ring" the well is an imaginary holding place: "[m]y wedding-ring lies in a basket / as if at the bottom of a well." For Levertov, to speak of the ring in poetry is to acknowledge its place at the bottom of the well, that is, the place where transformation is possible. Poetry removes the ring from its "crouched place," thus clearing "the way to and from the soul's hall."

The well is an important structure to which Levertov turns repeatedly when transformation of some sort is called for. Levertov's declaration, "when words penetrate deep into us they change the chemistry of the soul,"²⁹⁴ highlights her view of the direct relationship between poetic praxis and spiritual life. Refining her imagery is a crucial part of her craft as, evidently, this has consequences for how deeply her poetry can be received. The deeper the reception the better the chance for spiritual transformation. This applies not only to the reader but also to the poet: she shares in her own insight at the same time she shares it with others. Levertov's poetry not only describes but embodies this simultaneous two-way process. Levertov shares Robert Frost's belief in the importance of conveying rather than describing experience: "[y]ou know there's that passage in the introduction to Robert Frost's *Collected Poems*: he says, 'no tears for the writer, no tears for the reader; no this for the writer, no that for

²⁹⁴ Levertov, "The Poet in the World," *NSE*, 136.

the reader.' You can't expect the reader to enter into an experience if that experience wasn't authentic for the writer in the first place."²⁹⁵ Levertov strives to write poetry that is exemplary rather than explanatory. A beautiful sequence called "Artist to Intellectual (Poet to Explainer)"²⁹⁶ deals with experience that resists explanation:

i

'The lovely *obvious!* The feet
supporting the body's tree and its crown
of leafy flames, of fiery
knowledge roaming
into the eyes,
that are lakes, wells, open
skies! The lovely
evident, revealing
everything, more mysterious
than any
clueless inscription scraped in stone.
The ever-present, constantly vanishing,
carnal enigma!'

Here the well is a feature of experience rather than a symbol. Explanation — the "clueless inscription scraped in stone" — is incapable of revealing the "[t]he lovely *obvious!*" or, as it is later recast, "[t]he ever-present, constantly vanishing, carnal enigma!" Rather, it is the "eyes, / that are lakes, wells, open / skies" which reveal the earth-bound yet transcendent truth.

I want to consider two different kinds of tension in this poem. One is implicit in the distinction or gap between the approaches of "[p]oet" and "[e]xplainer." This tension relies upon a gap or a separation between two ideas. The second is the tension sustained by the aporia that enables the speaker to "taste / eternity." The aporia is an indefinitely large space that

²⁹⁵ Levertov, "Interview with Denise Levertov," by Ed Block, Jr, *Renascence* 50.1-2 (1997-8) 13. Frost's statement can be found in his essay, "The Figure a Poem Makes," the introduction to *Collected Poems of Robert Frost* (London: Cape, 1942) n. pag.

²⁹⁶ Levertov, *LF*, 103-4.

is not a gap or separation but a distance. It is particularly evident in the second and third stanzas of the poem:

ii

'Do I prophesy? It is
for now, for no future.
Do I envision? I envision
what every seed
knows, what shadow
speaks unheard
and will not repeat.
My energy
has not direction,
tames no chaos,
creates, consumes, creates
unceasing its own
wildfires that none
shall measure.'

iii

'Don't want to measure, want to be
the worm slithering wholebodied
over the mud and grit of what
may be a mile,
may be forever — pausing
under the weeds to taste
eternity, burrowing
down not along,
rolling myself
up at a touch, outstretching
to undulate in abandon to exquisite rain,
returning, if so I desire, without
reaching that goal the measurers
think we must head for. Where is
my head? Am I not
worm all over? My own
orient!'

The fact that the speaker can "taste / eternity" and experience what she describes as "[m]y own orient" indicates the second tension. It is not a distance *between* but a distance *of*. An understanding of this distance is essential to an appreciation of Levertov's poetry from this point onward. In "Artist to Intellectual (Poet to Explainer)" and the remaining poems the distance is one of desire.

In Chapter Two I discussed “the experience of poetry” as something that involves simultaneous events: someone experiences poetry, and poetry undergoes an experience.²⁹⁷ The phrase “the distance of desire” oscillates, too, within the relation between desire and distance. For example, desire is a measure of distance, and distance is an aspect of desire. It is impossible to trace their paths exactly since they are events rather than objects. It is also impossible to predict their interactions. The poet is like Michael, in Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader*, who reflects, “[o]ften enough in my life I have done things I had not decided to do.”²⁹⁸ As in Michael’s story, the experience of poetry is a journey that cannot be foretold. In an interview with Levertov, Emily Archer comments that

Americans tend to exalt ‘experience’ itself, as though we’re *acquiring* these happenings — ‘been there, done that, got the tee-shirt’ — ‘taking it in,’ consuming, rather than keeping a distance that allows that mountain or animal or person to keep its integrity. There’s a wonderful letter from Rilke to Clara, that talks about maintaining the ‘Near and the Far’ and about the consequences of satisfying longing for the beautiful or grand by appropriating or consuming it. It’s the practice of a certain kind of distance, never to be confused with indifference, that allows us to respect the autonomy or integrity of any given person, place, or thing.²⁹⁹

This “distance that allows that mountain or animal or person to keep its integrity” is also the central and concluding idea of “Artist to Intellectual (Poet to Explainer).” The “worm slithering wholebodied / over the mud and grit of what / may be a mile / may be forever” never reaches “that goal the measurers / think we must head for.” Instead, the worm is delivered to

²⁹⁷ When I think of this grammatical oscillation I am tempted to notate it in the form of the mathematical symbol for infinity [∞] with one word contained in one loop and the other word in the second loop. The words are separated by the middle structure (two lines crossing over in the symbol and the word “of” in the sentence) but they are also connected in the imaginative gesture towards infinity.

²⁹⁸ Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway (London: Phoenix, 1997) 18.

²⁹⁹ Levertov, “A Conversation with Denise Levertov,” by Emily Archer, *Image: A Journal of the Arts* 18 (1997-8) 55-72. Archer’s Ph.D. thesis is entitled “Singing the Songs of Degrees: Denise Levertov and the Tradition of Psalming.” It was submitted in 1996 at Georgia State University.

the ecstasy of "outstretching / to undulate in abandon to exquisite rain" and to the realization of its "own / orient!" The worm occupies a distance that contains "seed," "mud," "grit," "weeds" and "rain" as well as "[m]y own / orient." As Archer states above, distance is "never to be confused with indifference" and indeed the relationship between the worm and things is one of extraordinary intimacy, unlike the kind of relationship that would be achieved through "appropriating or consuming." In the distance, the worm discovers both the "autonomy" and the "integrity" of the things it encounters.

Life in the Forest contains another couple of poems that feature the well image. Both "Slowly"³⁰⁰ and "A Pilgrim Dreaming"³⁰¹ are meditations on the possibilities opened up by desire. Like Levertov's earlier poem "The Thread," "Slowly" describes a transcendent thread that is woven into experience. The speaker in "The Thread" announces that "[s]omething is very gently, / invisibly, silently, / pulling at me."³⁰² However, in "Slowly" the speaker's observations occur from a greater distance. The emphasis is upon a "spirit" which "[h]olds / at heart a red thread, winding / back to the world" and is remote from the "one who holds / the far end, / far off." Despite the distance, though, the spirit maintains a stance of openness, "[w]aking" and "listening," to what might happen:

Spirit has been alone
of late. Built a house
of fallen leaves
among exposed tree-roots.
Plans dreamily
to fetch water

from a stone well.
Sleeps
hungrily.

³⁰⁰ Levertov, *LF*, 116-7.

³⁰¹ Levertov, *LF*, 124-5.

³⁰² Levertov, *P*, 50.

Waking,

is mute,
 listening. Spirit
 doesn't know
 what the sound will be,
 song or cry.
 Perhaps

one word. Holds
 at heart a red thread, winding

back to the world,

to one who holds
 the far end,
 far off.

Spirit
 throws off the quilts
 when darkness
 is very heavy,

shuffles among
 the leaves
 upstairs and down
 waiting.

Wants
 the thread to vibrate

again. Again! Crimson!

Meanwhile refuses
 visitors, asks
 those who come
 no questions,
 answers none. Digs in
 for winter,
 slowly.

The desire for connection with "the world" is not a source of frustration or longing and there is no attempt on the part of the spirit to reduce the distance between this dwelling place and the world. Rather, the spirit calmly acknowledges the need to prepare thoroughly for survival during the coming winter. Early in the poem the spirit "[p]lans dreamily / to fetch water / from a stone well." Even the well is located at a distance from the spirit. However, there is no urgency because just as the spirit knows that

the world is on the other end of the string, it also trusts the well to be a source of sustenance. Despite the fact that, after his waiting and listening, the "spirit / doesn't know / what the sound will be," there is unshaken faith in the possibility of an ongoing relationship with the world in the here and now. So much so that the world at the other end of the thread is part of the spirit's experience of the here and now: the thread is a continuum enabling the spirit to be "alone" and to connect with "the world." One way of looking at the tension or activity along this continuum is to compare "Slowly" with "A Pilgrim Dreaming." The first deals with the experience and desire of the spirit while the second deals with an individual who inhabits the "far off" world.

The central figure of the poem shares the spirit's uncertainty about what lies beyond his own experience. Quietly, he dreams of transformation brought about by his own openness to the "gazing spirit":

By the fire light
of Imagination, brand
held high in the pilgrim's
upraised hand, he sees,
not knowing what boundaries it may have,

a well, a pool or river —
water's darkly shining
mirror, offering
his sought-for Self.

O, he silently
cries out, reaching gladly.
But *O*, again: he sees
dimly, beside the knowledge
he has sought, another:

now he hesitates —
she whose face attentively
looks from the water up to him,
tutelary spirit of this place,
of the water-mirror,

who is she. It is
not a question.
It is a question

and troubles him. The flames

flutter and fail, Imagination
falters. His image
vanishes, he is left
in a vague darkness.

Then it is
he fears the glimmering presence,
her image
vanished like his own,
yet not utterly. Only

when with his breath
he reawakens fire, the light
of vision, will he once more

know the steady look, the face
of his own life. Only in presence
of his Self
can he look gladly
at that other face,

the mirror's gazing spirit,
mute, eloquent, weak, a power,
powerless,
yet giving
what he desires, if he gives light.

His relationship with the "spirit" of the "water-mirror" is also his relationship with "the steady look, the face / of his own life." When "he gives light" the reward is not only a knowledge of the other but knowledge of himself. Just as the spirit in "Slowly" "doesn't know / what the sound will be," this figure "sees, / not knowing what boundaries it may have, / a well, a pool or river." In both poems the main figure desires connection with whatever is contained within this mysterious, unbounded space. The spirit in "Slowly" "[w]ants / the thread to vibrate" and the figure in "A Pilgrim Dreaming" desires the same connection. Early in "A Pilgrim Dreaming" the self is described as "his sought-for self," suggesting that the self is like an object to be searched for and obtained. The concluding line of the poem, however, refigures the self as "what he desires." The emphasis is no longer upon receiving what is "sought-for." In a

relationship that is sustained by his attentiveness to what is given rather than what can be captured, he discovers that “[o]nly in the presence / of his Self / can he look gladly / at that other face.” When he acknowledges what he has been given, he can respond to the “mute, eloquent” spirit with a desire that is characterised by distance rather than clinging. I imagine that the speaker now has the capacity to make the crimson thread of “Slowly” vibrate. In the boundless space of the “well” he discovers “what he desires.” This turns out to be vastly different from anything resembling certainty. It is rather a capacity to inhabit the distance of relationship between himself and the “mirror’s gazing spirit.” Desire is a major aspect of Levertov’s poetic exploration of relationship, and I will devote the second part of this chapter to a reading of Levertov’s most penetrating examination of desire, “A Tree Telling of Orpheus.”³⁰³

³⁰³ Levertov, *RA*, 309-13.

II

*He read, as few people do, with an openness to the possibility of being radically altered.*³⁰⁴

Raimond Gaita

“A Tree Telling of Orpheus”

Levertov's poetry is threaded through with desire. The word “desire” appears time and time again in the early, middle and later poems. Surprisingly, however, the poetry's deep concern with desire is not mirrored in Levertov's essays on poetry. Desire underpins all of Levertov's poetry and poetics, though, and therefore I devote time to exploring desire not as Levertov explores it in prose but as enacted in “A Tree Telling of Orpheus.” The discussion refers to the thinking of Paul Valéry, Derrida, Blanchot, Rahner, Marcel, Ricoeur and others. Each of these thinkers ponders desire as it manifests in literature. Their thoughts are particularly relevant to this chapter's discussion of “A Tree Telling of Orpheus” which, I argue, is a concentrated space of desire. Hegel and Jean-Paul Satre conceive of desire as a response to unfulfilment. I take a different focus. I work, along with Levertov and the thinkers to which I turn in this chapter, to clarify ways in which desire functions as a space of affirmation.

In “A Tree Telling of Orpheus” Levertov's early preoccupation with Objectivism is transformed into an interest in experience. One of the aims of Objectivism is to allow things to be autonomous, or to speak for themselves. While this occurs in “A Tree Telling of Orpheus,” the

³⁰⁴ Raimond Gaita, *Romulus, My Father* (Melbourne: Text, 1998) 73.

emphasis is not so much upon the things themselves as the speaker's experience of them. In "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" Levertov is attentive to the activity that occurs in the distance that constitutes experience. As already discussed, experience entails a journey in which the search for meaning or truth is always incomplete. Therefore, I want to consider the possibility that, in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus," desire is the fundamental activity that occurs within experience.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is refigured in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" which features a tree-speaker that "sees" and "hears." At the outset of the poem the atmosphere is one of quiet attention: "[w]hite dawn. Stillness." These opening words create a quiet backdrop against which the speaker's recollections occur and helps to encompass the reader in the poem's meditations. However, it is not long before activity begins, initially in the form of "rippling." This movement continues throughout the poem until the climactic final line when the movement is recognised as a kind of music.

Music provides the basic form in which the poem rests. Music is an experience that transforms utterly the speaker's relationship with his surroundings:

White dawn. Stillness. When the rippling began
 I took it for sea-wind, coming to our valley with rumors
 of salt, of treeless horizons. But the white fog
 didn't stir; the leaves of my brothers remained outstretched,
 unmoving.

 Yet the rippling drew nearer — and then
 my own outermost branches began to tingle, almost as if
 fire had been lit below them, too close, and their twig-tips
 were drying and curling.

 Yet I was not afraid, only
 deeply alert.

At first the music takes the form of a rippling that is not visible but can be felt as a tingling: "my own outermost branches began to tingle, almost / as

into an experience of Orpheus's song and, as the poem unfolds, he becomes physically involved in the music. This level of involvement requires him to respond to the song and to be open to the risk of being changed by it. As discussed in Chapter Two, experience involves risk. One of the reasons for this is that it takes place not as an abstract category of thought but as a temporal, historical event. To experience something is to risk. At the extreme, experience can be said to involve the risk of death. Some thinkers in the twentieth century assert that experience requires the risky activity of listening in order to be appreciated as the complex event that it is. John Gregg points out that

Blanchot, Lyotard, Deleuze, Foucault, and Derrida are all dedicated to the proposition that the wax in our ears be removed. Each in his own way exhorts us to listen to the 'music of life,' the irreducible, unarrestable murmur that secretly resides at the heart of all discourses as both their enabling condition and their ultimate possibility. Taken collectively, their work constitutes a relentless effort to attune our hearing to the affirmation contained in this strange, unworldly music.³⁰⁶

Although I refer to the work of Blanchot and Derrida, I do not explore in detail the philosophies of these thinkers. What interests me, in the light of "A Tree Telling of Orpheus," is the interaction between poetry and music, and what this indicates about form in poetry. In "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" form is presented as something more than a structure that represents a thing or a concept. Form occurs as music. If we remove the wax from our ears, do we really hear the "'music of life,' the irreducible, unarrestable murmur that secretly resides at the heart of poetry as its enabling condition and its ultimate possibility"? The rest of this chapter discusses form that is not a structure but an event that enables things to be perceived as circular and transparent, that is, as experiences rather than objects. "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" is a microcosmic examination of the

³⁰⁶ John Gregg, *Maurice Blanchot and the Literature of Transgression* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994) 200.

activity of desire that occurs, particularly in the image of the well, in the poetry from this point onward. In order to recognise the form that desire takes it is necessary, as Gregg states, to "attune our hearing to the affirmation contained in this strange, unworldly music."

"A Tree Telling of Orpheus," and Levertov's later poetry, demonstrates the way things and meanings cannot be grasped in language but only approached. To attempt to grasp a thing or a concept in language is to witness its slipping into the distance of one's reach. Music, which requires one to listen, is one way in which Levertov explores this event of simultaneous invitation and withdrawal.

Marc Redfield highlights Blanchot's belief that "[l]iterature, in its ontological inessentiality, cannot be mastered by a concept or a desire."³⁰⁷ As I see it, it is literature's form, rather than its qualities as such, that embodies this irreducibility. That is to say, one cannot claim that literature dissolves this or that conceptual scheme, or that literature holds a mirror up to one's desire, without having first had the experience of this. To talk about literature as a set of characteristics is to buy into the same explanatory, conceptual, grasping frame that, according to the thinkers already discussed, literature reveals as transparent. Stephen Mulhall, with regard to Heidegger's thinking, stresses "[t]he concreteness of concrete things, the essential sense in which things are, and must be, richer than any definition of them we might possibly frame."³⁰⁸ It is not the qualities of literature that give it richness and importance but its being. This puts the writer in a difficult position with regards to her intentions to create something. Where does she start, if not with a concept? As Gregg points out "[t]he predicament of the writer, for Blanchot, is that of Orpheus, who

³⁰⁷ Marc Redfield, "Blanchot," *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Michael Groden and Martin Kreisworth (London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1994) 93.

Orpheus dreams of a future beyond current limits. He sings of a journey to a place that is "deeper than roots." Upon hearing Orpheus's song, the speaker undergoes a sudden transformation like that of a sapling whose growth has been accelerated by frost. This rapid growth is both an awesome discovery and a terrible shock: "it seemed / my thick bark would split like a sapling's that / grew too fast in the spring / when a late frost wounds it." The action of wounding suggests destruction, as does the flaming of the fire in the next stanza, yet the wounding announces the beginning of the tree's awareness of the connectedness it shares with the surrounding world. There is no wound to speak of, just an image of thick bark that splits as the tree expands. Just as the wound is not a thing but an event of transformation, the tree is described less as an object than a meeting of "frost and fire":

Fire he sang,
that trees fear, and I, a tree, rejoiced in its flames.
New buds broke forth from me though it was full
summer.

As though his lyre (now I knew its name)
were both frost and fire, its chords flamed
up to the crown of me.

I was seed again.

I was fern in the swamp.

I was coal.

Listening is both a surrender and an extraordinary passion: "[f]ire, he sang, / that trees fear, and I, a tree, rejoiced in its flames." This rejoicing is made possible by the attention given to Orpheus's song. As already discussed, Levertov believes that attention is necessary in the writing of poetry. She agrees with Rilke's recommendation to live one's life with attention and for poets to view their work as experience rather than artifact:

The models Rilke presents as truly great...were heroically and exhilaratingly impassioned about art itself, and unflagging in its alluring, demanding service. 'Work and have patience ...Draw your whole life into this circle,' he quotes Rodin as saying. Rilke's emphasis on 'experience', on living one's life with attention, is always balanced by an equal emphasis on the doing of one's art

of the singing
 so dreadful the storm-sounds were, where there was no storm,
 no wind but the rush of our
 branches moving, our trunks breasting the air.
 But the music!
 The music reached us.

Despite the tree's "terror" it accepts the reality of being "wrenched from the earth root after root, / the soil heaving and cracking, the moss tearing asunder." The music is so powerful it wrenches not only the tree but its "brothers" as well. The trees experience "pain" as they break "themselves / out of / their depths." The stanza ends, though, on a note of celebration which is sustained until the end of the poem. The joyful mood, here and in many of Levertov's poems, inclines me to disagree with Bernd Engler's reading of Levertov's poetry as a form of disillusioned resignation at the uncontrollable nature of experience. He writes that, for Levertov, "[t]he moment of epiphany is characterized by a disillusioning 'almost.'"³¹⁴ Engler's "almost" suggests a lack or an exhaustion about Levertov's moments of poetic vision. She is, however, clearly comfortable with, and curious about, uncertainties and she is not disillusioned by their consequences. Levertov's acknowledgement of uncertainties takes the form of affirmation or fulfilment rather than disillusionment. As discussed in Chapter One, the fact that uncertainty exists means that there is always cause for hope. In fact, it seems that hope relies upon uncertainty. The tree's roots are being torn in pain, and it has no idea about what is happening, yet when it listens it hears not only the "storm-sounds" but also the "music." It is wrenched out of its habitual place and is unsure what will follow. However, the tree's desire is to follow the music and this leads eventually to a transformation that enables the trees to dance and celebrate their connection with the world around them.

The trees embody Weil's imperative to act in accordance with desire: "[w]e have to go down to the root of our desires in order to tear the energy from its object. That is where the desires are true in so far as they are energy. It is the object which is unreal. But there is an unspeakable wrench in the soul at the separation of a desire from its object."³¹⁵ In "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" the source of the music is never present. The tree's desire to follow Orpheus is like wind in its leaves, lifting it up like a sail and helping it to move, albeit painfully, from one place to another. This renewable energy seems to arise out of the tree's response to Orpheus's song rather than from Orpheus himself. Thus the energy belongs not in the space between Orpheus and the tree but in the tree's desire. Orpheus is neither present nor absent but "unreal" and the tree's awareness of this is accompanied by "an unspeakable wrench in the soul at the separation of a desire from its object." The tree's desire takes over its whole being, body and soul, and it risks death in order to pay attention to it. Desire occurs in Levertov's poetry as both a noun and a verb, or as Levinas would put it, a "said" and a "saying."³¹⁶ In Levinas's thinking, desire as "saying" must involve responsibility to the other.³¹⁷ For Levertov, desire does not grasp for some specific thing. Rather, it desires and thereby affirms the poetry's relationship with the other. The word "affirmation" features in the writings of both Derrida and Blanchot, and it helps to express their belief that relationship of this kind, in poetry and in experience, will occur no matter what.

In his dialogue entitled "Knowledge of the Unknown," Blanchot discusses desire as something different from need. He refers to

³¹⁴ Bernd Engler, "A Poetics of Approximations: Denise Levertov's Self-Reflexive Poetry," *Poetics in the Poem: Critical Essays on American Self-Reflexive Poetry*, ed. Dorothy Z. Baker (New York: Lang, 1997) 237.

³¹⁵ Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, trans. Arthur Wills, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 1956) 67.

³¹⁶ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 6.

“metaphysical desire” and suggests that it is “desire for that with which one has never been united, the desire of a self not only separated but happy with the separation that makes it a self, and yet still in relation with that from which it remains separated and of which it has no need: the unknown, the foreign, *autrui*.”³¹⁸ When an individual desires something, she comes face to face with the absence of the thing. This is why Weil writes that “[t]here is something impossible about desire; it destroys its object.”³¹⁹ Weil considers what happens when desire is directed towards God. She describes the experience of God’s absence as the “dark night.”³²⁰ For her, poetry occurs in this absence: “[a] poem must mean something, and *at the same time* nothing — that nothing which belongs to on high.”³²¹ The relationship with the other occurs in this strange open space in which meaning is absent and present at once. This relationship is the territory of desire. In a discussion of *Romeo and Juliet*, Derrida writes about “the very birth of desire”: “I love because the other is the other, because its time will never be mine. The living duration, the very presence of its love remains infinitely distant from mine, distant from itself in that which stretches it toward mine and even in what one might want to describe as amorous euphoria, ecstatic communion, mystical intuition.”³²² Desire is a relation that separates as it connects. The other is “infinitely distant,” not as a dead and remote impossibility but as an event of simultaneous presence and absence. Derrida writes of desire as “the most loving affirmation — it is

³¹⁷ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 37.

³¹⁸ Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993) 53.

³¹⁹ Weil, *Notebooks*, 421.

³²⁰ Weil, *Notebooks*, 421. I capitalize the word “God” in order to be consistent with Levertov’s capitalization of it in most of her poetry and prose. In particular, she capitalizes the word in her later essay, “Work that Enfaiths” (1990) *NSE*. This essay is a valuable exploration of Levertov’s thinking on the specific connection between poetry and faith.

³²¹ Weil, *Notebooks*, 424.

³²² Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 420-1.

the chance of desire."³²³ Desire functions as its own condition of possibility while remaining distant even "from itself." No effort of will opens up this distance. Rather, it is desire itself which does the opening. The tree's desire is a kind of awakening or self-actualization, an experience of deeper connection with the surrounding world. Given the absence of an object, it is understandable that Mark C. Taylor would declare that "[d]esire desires desire."³²⁴ And Weil tells us that "[t]he will only controls a few movements of a few muscles, and these movements are associated with the representation of the change of position of nearby objects . . . Inward supplication is the only reasonable way, for it avoids stiffening the muscles which have nothing to do with the matter. What could be more stupid than to tighten up our muscles and set our jaws about virtue, or poetry, or the solution of a problem? Attention is something very different."³²⁵ It would be foolish for the tree to resist by using its will to tense against such an immensely powerful force for transformation. To do so would certainly cause more pain and the tree would lose the opportunity to grow further. Of course it is impossible for trees to uproot themselves, walk with other trees to another location and replant themselves. But the impossible occurs because in a world where objects are unreal it is possible to move through them. The tree's solidity breaks down. Unreal Orpheus and the unreal trees share in an eerie communion that transcends their physical meeting. Their encounter is impossible if they are both unreal, and yet it does occur, in experience that is subject to desire. The whole poem, then, can be read as an image of the musical, dynamic form that desire takes.

³²³ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 421.

³²⁴ Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984) 147.

³²⁵ Weil, *Notebooks*, 205.

We have stood here since,
 in our new life.
 We have waited.
 He does not return.
 It is said he made his earth-journey, and lost
 what he sought.
 It is said they felled him
 and cut up his limbs for firewood.
 And it is said
 his head still sang and was swept out to sea singing.
 Perhaps he will not return.
 But what we have lived
 comes back to us.
 We see more.
 We feel, as our rings increase,
 something that lifts our branches, that stretches our furthest
 leaf-tips
 further.
 The wind, the birds,
 do not sound poorer but clearer,
 recalling our agony, and the way we danced.
 The music!

Here words do change the chemistry of the soul. The trees' longing is transformed into desire as they realise that their relationship with Orpheus is not a simple interaction between a tree and a person but a vast space in which neither the tree nor the person is present. Priority is given to movement rather than to essences: the tree reflects that "words he said / taught us to leap and to wind in and out / around one another" and "[w]e learned to dance." Levertov's impassioned exploration of the tree's experience indicates her belief in the need to be in close relationship with the surrounding world and to risk being transformed in that experience. She notes that

[t]he tree has become a great symbol of what we need, what we destroy, what we must revere and protect and learn from if life on earth is to continue and that mysterious hope, *life at peace*, is to be attained. The tree's deep and wide root-system, its broad embrace and lofty reach from earth into air, its relation to fire and to human structures, as fuel and as material, and especially to water which it not only needs but gives (drought ensuing when the forests are

destroyed) just as it gives us purer air — all these make it a powerful archetype.³²⁷

Seen in the light of Levertov's beliefs regarding "what we need, what we destroy, what we must revere and protect and learn from," "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" offers valuable insight into the relationship humans have with the surrounding world. In order to achieve "*life at peace*" it is necessary to pay close attention to archetypes such as the tree, with its "deep and wide root-system, its broad embrace and lofty reach from earth into air" and its capacity to give as well as consume. The tree is transformed by words that issue from an absent origin. Since this in no way reduces their creative, transformational power I want to pay particular attention to language as a space that is made possible by its limits.

I will begin by suggesting that the most important measure of language is the degree by which it enables horizontal transcendence, that is, an experience not of what is higher or larger but what is deeper and richer than the self. The limit of language proves to be a liberating constraint. In the poem at hand, the tree comes to realise that, like language, it can approach but it cannot capture the world. "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" embodies Engler's "almost," not in a spirit of disillusionment but in a spirit of hope and celebration. Here the "failure" to deliver unequivocal meanings has the effect of diverting the reader's attention away from abstractions and nudging him back into the experience of the poem. Weil writes that "[a]ttention is intimately related to desire — not to the will, but to desire."³²⁸ The music in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" strikes me as a kind of unconscious announcement that, from now on, Levertov's poetry will sustain a connection between the image and experience. Until now the symbol of the well has indicated rather than

³²⁷ Levertov, "Poetry and Peace: Some Broader Dimensions," 1989, *NSE*, 166.

³²⁸ Weil, *Notebooks*, 527.

embodied this connection. And still it is not until *Candles in Babylon* (1982) that the well occurs as an image rather than a symbol. Meanwhile, in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" (1970) Levertov creates a musical space which finds further expression, in the later poetry, in the image of the well. The path of development from symbol to image is seen by Blanchot as an important stage in the growth of the self. He highlights that "psychoanalysis maintains that the image, far from abstracting us and causing us to live in the mode of gratuitous fantasy, seems to deliver us profoundly to ourselves."³²⁹ In poetry, Levertov discovers something beyond the intellect's "abstracting" abilities. She finds that without the possibility of escape by means of vertical transcendence, she is compelled to act or respond within her own experience. She works hard to realize the possibilities and limitations of being in relationship with the surrounding world. The most developed expression of this relationship is found in the later poems, where, it can be surmised that, Levertov is delivered profoundly to herself.

Being delivered to your self is not like winning a prize. The self is associated with duration, and belongs to the same temporal domain as experience. Rather than asking, "what characteristics can be attributed to the self?" it is more fruitful to ask "what occurs during the self?" One preliminary way of answering this is to look, as I did in Chapter Two, at the self which finds and loses itself in experience. A closer look at experience reveals an activity that drives this finding and losing. What is the activity that makes a self seek and lose, and seek again? From my reading of Levertov, and many other writers, theorists and philosophers, I am faced continually with the notion of desire. Within the movement of desire there is an openness to both the possibility of uttering the last word and the possibility that this will never happen. Or, to put it differently,

³²⁹ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 262.

desire seeks relentlessly the objects it recognises as illusions. Valéry suggests that the poet desires to freeze experience in language. What the poet discovers, however, is that her desire functions to give expression to the fulfilment that is always already there within her experience. To freeze experience would be to destroy desire. For Valéry, art embodies this aporic desire:

This is the great problem of our art: in some measure to prolong the happiness of a moment. There are happy minutes for everyone; no work is without its beauties. But I know of nothing rarer than a composition of some length — say a hundred lines — in which there are no inconsistencies and irregularities.

For each of us, therefore, there is an extreme rigor of desire, *a standard difficulty*. A certain unattainable point is essential for the movement of an artist's mind.³³⁰

Valéry's "extreme rigour of desire" indicates the demands that desire places upon the individual. In reaching towards something there is always a limit of some sort to be encountered. If a thing were attainable then desire would peter out. It is the limit itself that sustains desire. The "*standard difficulty*" is the reality that for desire to occur there must be a "certain unattainable point." This is why I think of desire as fulfillment rather than lack. Desire is given life, not nullified by, the limit. This can be seen in language where the limits of language invest it with promise. Perhaps the same can be said with regards to mortality and experience. That is, death is the background against which life is lived. This is not a cause for despair but a cause for embracing and witnessing life while it lasts. Life endures only as long as death. Similarly, desire occurs only as long as its object or limit. While death cannot be achieved within life, an object cannot be possessed by desire. Death and possession are impossible experiences. In "A Tree Telling of Orpheus," for example, Orpheus is desired but never possessed. Yet, the tree declares that Orpheus "stilled our longing." Orpheus transforms longing into desire, and music is the

sound of this transformation. The tree does not alter its surroundings but is altered by them. At the end of the poem, the tree experiences the world differently:

He does not return.
 It is said he made his earth-journey, and lost
 what he sought.
 It is said they felled him
 and cut up his limbs for firewood.
 And it is said
 his head still sang and was swept out to sea singing.
 Perhaps he will not return.
 But what we have lived
 comes back to us.
 We see more.
 We feel, as our rings increase,
 Something that lifts our branches, that stretches our furthest
 leaf-tips
 further.
 The wind, the birds,
 do not sound poorer but clearer,
 recalling our agony, and the way we danced.
 The music!

Orpheus "does not return" and yet "[s]omething" endures. The trace of Orpheus "comes back to us" so that "[w]e see more. / We feel, as our rings increase, / Something that lifts our branches, that stretches our furthest / leaf-tips / further." The knowledge that "[p]erhaps he will not return" is essential to the tree's acknowledgement of "our agony, and the way we danced." While in the early poetry Levertov explores a longing to dissolve the separation between inner and outer worlds, later on the image is a space in which the speaker is suspended. "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" occurs in the form of distance in which longing and disillusionment are transformed into desire and fulfilment.

Engler's comments about Levertov's poetry come close to identifying her later poetry as distance. He focuses on the poet's longing for what lies beyond representation and on the insufficiency of language to provide it. He also identifies the poet's experience of "a hidden, more

essential reality 'behind' artistic representation." What he doesn't ask, however, is what occurs during the experience of this "hidden, more essential reality." He focuses on the inability of language to deliver this reality even though he doesn't spend much time wondering what such a reality might be:

Given the knowledge that what is represented in the painting can only acquire an as if-validity of a fictive truth, the poet longs for an experience of art which will allow the perceiver to reach beyond the surface of the mere representational likeness of reality. Having experienced epiphanies of a hidden, more essential reality 'behind' artistic representation, the poet wishes to extend the elusive moments of these artistic epiphanies.³³¹

So far in this thesis I have probed the experience of this "hidden, more essential reality 'behind' artistic representation" and I believe, along with Engler, that "artistic epiphanies" are "experienced epiphanies." This situation has repercussions for the way we approach art. Can it be approached at all, or is the approach always a response? Valéry writes about the involvement of the "whole being" in poetry. His idea that poetry "regulates our depths" reinforces a notion of poetry as a form of action:

Poetry must extend over the whole being; it stimulates the muscular organization by its rhythms, it frees or unleashes the verbal faculties, ennobling their whole action, it regulates our depths, for poetry aims to arouse or reproduce the unity and harmony of the living person, an extraordinary unity that shows itself when a man is possessed by an intense feeling that leaves none of his powers disengaged.

In fact, the difference between the action of a poem and of an ordinary narrative is physiological. The poem unfolds itself in a richer sphere of our functions of movement, it exacts from us a participation that is nearer to complete action.³³²

The reader does not unfold the poem. Rather, "[t]he poem unfolds itself" and "exacts from us a participation that is nearer to complete action" than that required by a prose narrative. It is here, at the intersection of language and experience, that thinking becomes fascinating and strange because,

³³¹ Engler, "Denise Levertov's Self-Reflexive Poetry," 236.

³³² Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, 211.

while language deals well with the "inconsistencies and irregularities" that Valéry mentioned a little earlier, logical thinking does not. So, is it language or theory that is incoherent? I think it is neither language nor theory, but the experience of them that is incoherent. As Blanchot writes, "something essential is lacking in anyone who expresses himself."³³³ In a discussion of Heidegger's approach to "The Word" by Stefan Georg, Bruns points out that "the important message of the poem is that this experience does *not* occur in the fullness of the poet's expression; on the contrary, the poet experiences the power of the word precisely at the moment when his own relationship with the word undergoes a decisive break."³³⁴ The "lacking" and the "decisive break" occur not in language itself but in our experience of it. Bruns could be referring to poetry in general when he asserts that Georg's "poem is finally not about the power of the word but about our proper relationship with it. This relationship is not that of expression or use; it is one in which renunciation replaces enunciation or pronouncement."³³⁵ Any power that can be associated with language, then, is located in the relationship with it. Bruns's comments regarding relationship, together with my own emphasis upon the importance of poetry as relationship, emphasize the reasons behind Heidegger's preference for the phrase "experience *with*, not experience *of*."³³⁶ As Bruns writes, for Heidegger, "[l]anguage is not to be made an object of experience."³³⁷ This is also why Blanchot asserts that "[w]hen I first begin, I do not speak in order to say something, rather a nothing demands to speak, nothing speaks, nothing finds its being in speech and

³³³ Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Station Hill, 1981) 43.

³³⁴ Bruns, *Heidegger's Estrangements*, 104. The full text of "The Word" is in Appendix IV.

³³⁵ Bruns, *Heidegger's Estrangements*, 104.

³³⁶ Bruns, *Heidegger's Estrangements*, 100.

³³⁷ Bruns, *Heidegger's Estrangements*, 100.

the being of speech is nothing."³³⁸ So, then, what does language achieve? I know that language is a system of signs which is intended to transmit meaning. I also know that the relation between language and meaning is a kind of open field which is continually transforming. Language and meaning are so different from one another that they most certainly do not fit together like lock and key. As I have discussed already, language is closer to being than to meaning. However, this does not erase meaning from the equation. Hence, Hart writes that "for the reader, and for the poet who reads while writing, presentation and representation are always imbricated."³³⁹ How does meaning survive, then, if language is more intimate with being? It seems to me that meaning is the unreachable point towards which desire moves. Hart writes that "[a] poem may point us to the gap between being and meaning, and in experiencing that void we may seek salvation, opening ourselves to a meaning of being that cannot present itself."³⁴⁰ Representation persists along with presentation, objects persist along with our recognition of their illusoriness, and concepts persist despite the impossibility of realising them in experience. Since representation and presentation coexist, I want to return to the infinity symbol and reflect on ways in which being and meaning might oscillate in the space it represents. Hart proposes a "gap between meaning and being" and also describes it as a "void." I can see why he thinks of it as a space. It is nothing in itself except a site that contains, impossibly, all things. The lack of fit between representation and presentation, and between meaning and being, occurs as a desiring movement from one to the other. The two never join up but always miss each other, like the distant and overlapping ribbons or curved lines that cross over in the middle of the infinity symbol. The experience of language is like treading the path of this symbol. The

³³⁸ Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, 43.

³³⁹ Hart, "The Experience of Poetry," 289.

Orpheus's absent presence. His persistence in his own absence enables the tree to experience a desire that manifests as distance:

He stilled our longing.
 He sang our sun-dried roots back into earth,
 watered them: all night rain of music so quiet
we could almost
 not hear it in the
moonless dark.
 By dawn he was gone.
We have stood here since,
 in our new life.
We have waited.
He does not return.
 It is said he made his earth-journey, and lost
 what he sought.

Orpheus's seeking and losing is the same seeking and losing that the tree undergoes. Earlier, when "the poem descended a scale, a stream over stones," the movement of descent signalled a move into the experience with language rather than out of it via abstraction. The descent is a realisation of the horizontal transcendence discussed, in more theoretical tones, in Chapter One.

Seeking and losing are fundamental to the journey that Orpheus, the tree, the poet and the reader take. Far from being a source of disillusionment, though, this is an example to learn from. As Levertov sees it, humans who are currently seeking to possess the world around them need to recognise that their attempts are always bound to fail. Things in the world are being appropriated at a faster rate than ever. Trees, animals, water, and air are being appropriated for the material and psychological comfort of humans. This simply will not continue to be possible beyond a certain limit, however. There may be souvenirs of human destruction in the form of dead waterways, radioactive land, limited biodiversity and air that needs to be filtered before it can be breathed. As everybody knows, this already occurs in many regions of the world. An alternative to human attempts to appropriate, capture, or possess, is to

develop a sustainable relationship with the world through an acknowledgement that things in the world are not reducible to our abstract schemes. If humans do not acknowledge the distance, and difference, between things in the world, neither will they be able to acknowledge the relationship they have with them. They will continue to act out of object-focussed longing rather than out of self-sufficient desire. When it comes to language, too, an attitude of attention rather than rapaciousness constitutes an appropriate response to an encounter with the world. In Levertov's poetry, language is a fundamental part of this response, and its most important measure is the degree to which it enables horizontal transcendence.

Paul de Man believes that we all follow "a directive that maintains and measures the distance that separates us from the centre of things."³⁴² The acceptance of desire as affirmation, then, is not necessarily easy. How can a "distance that separates us from the centre of things" be a good thing? Well, to say that desire is affirming is not to claim that desire is bliss. Transformation is built into the realisation of desire, and this transformation can involve a sickening and disorienting adjustment to deal with ever-changing circumstances. Levertov's "The Task," for example, is a testimony to the poet's difficult work of imaginatively transforming one's response to circumstance. "The Task" opens with an image of God as an old man who shuts out the world with sleep, whose stomach rumbles and who wears the look of death:

As if God were an old man
always upstairs, sitting about
in sleeveless undershirt, asleep,
arms folded, stomach rumbling,
his breath from open mouth
strident, presaging death . . .

³⁴² Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1971) 76.

This portrayal of God turns out to be a lifeless stereotype of a tired, old man. Instead of persisting with this stale scene, Levertov imagines that she can hear God's "loud clacking and whirring" loom, and that God also "listens for prayers".³⁴³

No, God's in the wilderness next door
 — that huge tundra room, no walls and a sky roof —
 busy at the loom. Among the berry bushes,
 rain or shine, that loud clacking and whirring,
 irregular but continuous;
 God is absorbed in work, and hears
 the spacious hum of bees, not the din,
 and hears far-off
 our screams. Perhaps
 listens for prayers in that wild solitude.
 And hurries on with the weaving:
 till it's done, the great garment woven,
 our voices, clear under the familiar
 blocked-out clamor of the task,
 can't stop their
 terrible beseeching. God
 imagines it sifting through, at last, to music
 in the astounded quietness, the loom idle,
 the weaver at rest.

In her essay, "Work that Enfaiths," Levertov explains that "I had pictured God as a weaver sitting at his loom in a vast wilderness, solitary as a bear in the Alaskan tundra, listening to the cries of anguish far off, audible above the clack of the loom because all else is so quiet — and hastening his task; for the cloth must be woven before the 'terrible beseeching' can cease."³⁴⁴ Finally, in "The Task," God's imagination transforms the "terrible beseeching" of "our screams" into a "music / in the astounding quietness, the loom idle, / the weave at rest." Just as God imagines human screams as music, the speaker imagines a beautiful image of God as a cosmic weaver, juxtaposed against the ordinary, weary man of the first six lines. By the end of the poem God's imaginative effort has transformed a hellish situation into a sanctuary of music and peace. In her essay, "To

³⁴³ Levertov, *OP*, 78.

³⁴⁴ Levertov, 1990, *NSE*, 252.

Write is to Listen," Levertov comments on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice: "I am brought to remember Orpheus, who did not sing about hell: he was *in* hell, and sang there, leading the way out."³⁴⁵ In "The Task" God and the speaker lead the way out of experience by transforming it. At the end of the poem a relieved hush falls and the silence amid the noise is palpable. God's imaginative and transformational listening spurs me to consider Robert Doud's comment that, in Rahner's thinking, "God is the poet of the world."³⁴⁶ According to Emerson, the reverse is also true:

We are like persons who come out of a cave or cellar into the open air. This is the effect on us of tropes, fables, oracles and all poetic forms. Poets are thus liberating gods. Men have really got a new sense, and found within their world another world, or nest of worlds; for, the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop.³⁴⁷

Both God and the poet act to transform events and thereby transcend them. Poetry, for Levertov, demonstrates the amount of choice humans have in their response to events. She is concerned with the way in which her spiritual life is consistent with her ethical ideals of equality and respect for other forms of life, and she perceives that within her response there is scope for answering in the negative or in the affirmative. She finds solace in the intuition that answering in the affirmative is to follow God's desire:

God's nature, as Love, demands a freely given requital from that part of the creation which particularly embodies Consciousness: the Human. God therefore gives to human beings the power to utter yes or no — to perceive the whole range of dualities without which there could be no freedom. An *imposed* requital of love would be a contradiction in terms. Invisible wings are given to us too, by which, if we would dare to acknowledge and use them, we might transcend the dualities of time and matter — might be upheld to walk on water. Instead, we humans persistently say no, and persistently experience our wings only as a dragging weight on our backs. And so God remains nailed to the Cross — for the very

³⁴⁵ Levertov, 1965, *PIW*, 228.

³⁴⁶ Robert E. Doud, "Poetry and Sensibility in the Vision of Karl Rahner." *Thought* 58.231 (1983) 451.

³⁴⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (London: Belknap, 1983) 17.

nature of God as Love would be violated by taking back the gift of choice which is *our* very nature. It's an idea, or theory, undoubtedly familiar to many of you through works of religious philosophy; but *for me* it was original, not only because I hadn't come across such expositions of it but also because the concrete images which emerged in the process of writing convinced me at a more intimate level of understanding than abstract argument would have done.³⁴⁸

In Levertov's thinking, "freedom" or the capacity to "transcend" are not simply ideas. In the experience of writing poetry she becomes attuned to the choices that are available each step of the way. Her poems testify to the gifts that arise from choosing, or "daring," to "acknowledge and use" the "invisible wings" that have been given to her. Choosing to use her wings is a kind of homecoming for Levertov since, in her view, she is honouring "the gift of choice which is *our* very nature." She arrives at these conclusions through the experience of writing poems rather than through the application of theological or philosophical arguments. She points out that the "concrete images which emerged in the process of writing convinced me at a more intimate level of understanding than abstract argument would have done." This reminds me of Thomas Morris's assertion that "[w]e'll never make sense of it all by just finding a piece of information or an idea heretofore elusive to us but long known by some philosophical expert. That's not how the most important things work. Like it or not."³⁴⁹ Transcendence is one of the "important things" that cannot be reduced to a philosophical exercise. From my experience of Levertov's poetry, and my consideration of the thinkers discussed so far, I understand that, for Levertov, desire, rather than argumentation, determines the choices humans make as they tread along the path of experience. In an essay entitled "The Sense of Pilgrimage," Levertov quotes from D.H. Lawrence's "There are No Gods":

³⁴⁸ Levertov, "Work That Enfaiths," *NSE*, 251.

. . . I fall asleep with the gods, the gods
 that are not, or that are
 according to the soul's desire,
 like a pool into which we plunge, or do not plunge.³⁵⁰

While the "pool" of "the soul's desire" is permanent, one's choices in relation to it are changeable. The "gods" can be experienced depending upon the choices made by the speaker. The collective speaker in Levertov's "Standoff"³⁵¹ faces the same challenge. The speaker poses the question, "[w]hen shall we / dare to fly?" and presents an "abyss" that will gape at "us" until we risk flying off into it:

Assail God's hearing with gull-screech knifeblades.

Cozen the saints to plead our cause, claiming
 grace abounding.

God crucified on the resolve not to displume
 our unused wings

hears: nailed palms
 cannot beat off the flames of insistent sound,

strident or plaintive,
 nor reach to annul freedom —

nor would God renege.

Our shoulders ache. The abyss
 gapes at us.

When shall we
 dare to fly?

As in "The Task," God is listening. He has been "crucified on the resolve not to displume / our unused wings" and, accordingly, he observes the difficult decisions being made by humans, even when they involve the choice of turning away from him. He "hears: nailed palms" and "cannot

³⁴⁹ Thomas V. Morris, "Suspensions of Something More," *God and the Philosophers: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 14.

³⁵⁰ Levertov, *PIW*, 86. This poem is collected in D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Poems*, ed. Keith Sagar (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 224-5.

³⁵¹ Levertov, *BW*, 67.

beat off the flames of insistent sound, / strident or plaintive." That he will not "reach to annul freedom" is indicated by the statement, "nor would God renege." Here God does not dictate answers but hopes that individuals will realise that he holds fast, always, to listening to their pain, even when their anguish finds expression in murder. The freedom to kill (as in Christ's crucifixion) or not to kill is like the freedom to stay put or to fly. Being given the freedom to choose is tantamount to experiencing a kind of discipline. We are given the opportunity to make decisions that enable us to discover transcendence within our own experience. If transcendence was an obligatory experience then it would not be a gift.³⁵² Although "the abyss" of transcendence "gapes at us" we do not automatically fall into it. If we want to experience it we must "dare to fly" off the cliff of certainty and into the mysterious distance. In "Standoff," "[o]ur shoulders ache" because we respond to our freedom by answering no. Our "unused wings" weigh us down and "God remains nailed to the Cross." The concluding question — "when shall we / dare to fly?" — calls upon the reader to respond in some way. As Levertov's imaginative faculties grow, her experience of a spiritual call becomes stronger. Her later poetry, written during her years as a Christian, is her unique response to this call. Levertov's desire to write is strengthened by her awareness of the choices she has been given. The freedom with which she "dares to fly" is sustained by the choices, or limits, she is presented with. Her desire to fly manifests as a path into the experience of poetry rather than a simple adherence to religious orthodoxy. In the next chapter I discuss the image of the well in the later poetry and explore ways in which the well is a transparent distance that enables both poetic and spiritual vision.

³⁵² See Robyn Horner on the concept of the gift. "Rethinking God as Gift: Jean-Luc Marion and a Theology of Donation," diss., Monash U, 1998.

CHAPTER SIX

The Well of Relationship

In her 1972 collection, *Footprints*, Levertov connects poetry and prayer. "The Poem Unwritten" recounts a sensuous experience as "that poem, that prayer, / unwritten."³⁵³ The speaker's "worship" and "wonder" is played out in "the poem of your body, / of my hands upon your body":

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

As articulated here, the poem is both written and "unwritten." This last chapter journeys through this doubleness and attempts to connect the experiences I introduced earlier of listening, imagination, transformation, and relationship. The major focus of this chapter is the form that these interconnections take. I believe that this form occurs as a circular and transparent movement. The image of the well is an example of such a form. The well is experienced rather than viewed, and therefore I will focus not on the well as a set of

³⁵³ Levertov, *F*, 30.

characteristics but on the well as a site of activity. In other words, I want to look, with reference to the image of the well, at the way form is constituted by experience.

Poetry itself is a form that honours experience: it is a response to experience rather than a starting point from which experience arises. So often poetry takes place as an open question. Everybody knows about the inevitable phase in a child's early development when he asks repeatedly and with irrepressible curiosity, "why?" To say that poets never outgrow their desire to know "why" is to recognise their awareness that questions surpass answers. It can be said, somewhat epigrammatically, that answers are contained in questions. Much poetry has been written around this theme. Take Judith Wright's "Q to A," for example, and Kane's "Q and A."³⁵⁴ I would like, with the same patience displayed by Wright and Kane, to spend some time considering how the themes I have already discussed in this thesis interconnect to form questions that embody their own answers.

In poetry, Levertov seeks to know the "significance underneath and beyond the succession of temporal events":

The tragic and fearful character of our times is not something from which we can detach ourselves; we are *in* it, as fish are in the sea, whether we speak about it in our poems or not . . . more and more, what I have sought as a *reading writer*, is 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: a poetry which attests to the "deep spiritual longing" that Jorie Graham, in her very interesting essay of introduction to *The Best American Poetry*,

³⁵⁴ Judith Wright's "Q to A" is published in *Collected Poems, 1942-1970* (Melbourne: Robertson, 1971) 191. Paul Kane's "Q & A," is collected in *Drowned Lands* (Columbia, South Carolina: U of South Carolina P, 2000) 71-2.

1990 says is increasingly manifest in recent American verse.³⁵⁵

That she perceives something “underneath and beyond temporal events” indicates her belief in a transience regarding her relationship with the world. Levertov does not believe that answers will arrive from somewhere else. While she acknowledges that experience is a difficult duration — “[t]he tragic and fearful character of our times is not something from which we can detach ourselves” — she discerns that transcendence is possible, and is committed to discovering answers in her experience of relationship with the world.

The “deep spiritual longing” she refers to is a central concern in the later poetry. While *Candles in Babylon* and *Breathing the Water* deal with the necessity of embracing “some other power,” *Evening Train* and *Sands of the Well* feature the figure of Christ as an ordinary and awe-inspiring phenomenon.³⁵⁶ Levertov is aware that, due to the Christian content, readers might receive some later poems less favourably than those earlier on: “[m]aybe my Christianity is unorthodox, but it’s still a Christian unorthodoxy, liable to offend both skeptics and members of other faiths . . . So it remains to be seen what the reaction to my new poems will be. They’re certainly not going to be everybody’s cup of tea!”³⁵⁷ She sees no inconsistencies between her religious beliefs and her aesthetics. In fact, it can be argued that the beginnings of her religious faith can be found in her poetry. She states that,

³⁵⁵ Levertov, “Some Affinities of Content,” 1991, *NSE*, 4.

³⁵⁶ Levertov, “The Well,” *BW*, 57.

³⁵⁷ Levertov, “Invocations of Humanity: Denise Levertov’s Poetry of Emotion and Belief,” 1986, interview by Joan F. Hallisey, Brooker, *Conversations*, 146.

an avowal of 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.³⁵⁸

I think the reason for this is that both Levertov's religion and her poetry arise out of her basic ethical stance. She does not try to explain the rational links between religion and poetry but proceeds in her writing to show that they occur together in experience. In an interview with Hallisey, Levertov was asked to clarify specific points about the development of her Christian faith. Levertov refers Hallisey back to the poems themselves:

HALLISEY: Would you comment on your deepening understanding of the Incarnation as it figured in your gradual conversion to Christianity and as it figures in your present faith?

LEVERTOV: I cannot add anything to what is in the poems.³⁵⁹

Given Levertov's belief that the poems speak for themselves I will turn now to the later poems in order to discover the extent to which Levertov's aesthetics and ethics are one. The image of the well, in these poems, is a site in which listening, transcendence and relationship occur. I trace the well image in order to understand why Levertov returns continuously to this form. My investigation of the later poems reveals that the well is a form that is created by Levertov and, at the same time, a site in which she is herself transformed.

In "Desolate Light" the speaker views history as a vast well in which humans once lived according to faith and managed to work

³⁵⁸ Levertov, "A Poet's View," 1984, *NSE*, 243.

³⁵⁹ Levertov, "Invocations of Humanity," Brooker, *Conversations*, 186-7.

their way towards the light at the top.³⁶⁰ In the present, however, the privileging of reason prevents this ascent from occurring, and the community to which the speaker belongs finds itself standing outside the well, able only to peer into it:

We turn to history looking
for vicious certainties through which
voices edged into song,

engorged fringes of anemone swaying
dreamily through deluge,

gray Lazarus bearing
the exquisite itch and ache of blood returning.

Reason has brought us
more dread than ignorance did.
Into the open
well of centuries

we gaze, and see gleaming,
deep in the black broth at the bottom,
chains of hope by which our forebears
hoisted themselves
hand over hand towards light.

But we
stand at the edge looking back in and knowing
too much to reasonably hope. Their desired light
burns us.

*O dread,
drought that dries
the ground of joy till it cracks and
caves in,*

*O dread,
wind that sweeps up the offal of lies,
sweep my knowledge, too, into oblivion,*

drop me back in the well.

No avail.

³⁶⁰ Levertov, *CIB*, 77.

The speaker asks to be returned to the well: "*O dread, / wind that sweeps up the offal of lies, / sweep my knowledge, too, into oblivion, / drop me back in the well.*" However, a return to "the open / well of centuries" is impossible. The speaker's "*knowledge*" prevents her from being swept back into the ancient community, and, anyway, the desire of her "forebears" burns her. In the light of this concluding impasse, the poem can be seen as a testimony to the vast world of experience that human intention cannot control. While the speaker's forebears desired a kind of vertical transcendence, in the form of an upward movement towards the light, the speaker desires a descent to a place of origin. The speaker's plea does not bring about the desired return to the well, and the poem ends with an exhausted, "[n]o avail." However, her knowledge that a return is impossible does nothing to quell her desire for it. The desolation the speaker feels is different from despair. It is not a loss of hope but an acceptance of the fact that the site of her desire is "deep in the black broth at the bottom" of the well and not at the top in the "light." This is not particularly comforting: as the final line indicates, she is fully aware that she cannot be delivered "*into oblivion.*" However, her desire to be returned to "the open / well of centuries" does not dissipate. The plea "*drop me back in the well*" and the concluding line "[n]o avail" cannot be reconciled and yet neither statement is privileged over the other. However, the lines lie close to one another and desire moves silently through this intimate space. Like the silence of the moon dwelling at the bottom of the well in Levertov's earlier "Everything that Acts is Actual," the speaker's desire to return and the refusal she encounters is a mysterious event that cannot be understood with

recourse to "[r]eason." As I write this I can hear the echo of Keats's qualifying remark, "without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."³⁶¹ "Reason" is at a loss to account for the "vicious certainties" of the past. The imagination in "Everything that Acts is Actual" is both strong and isolated at the bottom of the well. Despite this doubleness, however, the bottom of the well is the only location where understanding and vision occur: "the imagination finding / itself and more than itself / alone and more than alone / at the bottom of the well where the moon lives."³⁶² In "Everything that Acts is Actual" and "Desolate Light" the imagination finds itself in the depths of understanding. In both poems the irregular indentation and enjambment, and the scattered italicized sections, demand that the reader's gaze zigzags unevenly. The movement resembles the twisting, turning path of particles descending to settle at the bottom of a well of water. At the last line of "Desolate Light" the busy, italicized letters return to normal, and the bold statement "[n]o avail" sits alone and still at the bottom of the page. The meaning of the words and the form in which they appear suggest a limit. To reach this point in the poem is not only to read about this limit but also to encounter it.

Another kind of limit occurs in "Writing in the Dark." Darkness initially presents as an obstacle to writing and then emerges as a necessary condition of possibility for the imagination to function. The speaker urges writers to keep on with their art, even when they are surrounded by darkness:

³⁶¹ Bromwich, "Negative Capability," *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 824.

It's not difficult.
 Anyway, it's necessary.

Wait till morning, and you'll forget.
 And who knows if morning will come.

Fumble for the light, and you'll be
 stark awake, but the vision
 will be fading, slipping
 out of reach.

You must have paper at hand,
 a felt-tip pen — ballpoints don't always flow,
 pencil points tend to break. There's nothing
 shameful in that much prudence: those are your tools.

Never mind about crossing your t's, dotting your i's —
 but take care not to cover
 one word with the next. Practice will reveal
 how one hand instinctively comes to the aid of the other
 to keep each line
 clear of the next.

Keep writing in the dark:
 a record of the night, or
 words that pulled you from depths of unknowing,
 words that flew through your mind, strange birds
 crying their urgency with human voices,

or opened
 as flowers of a tree that blooms
 only once in a lifetime:

words that may have the power
 to make the sun rise again.³⁶³

Here the poet is advised to seize the moment of inspiration when it occurs rather than waiting for sensible conditions or a proper time of day. Instincts are to be trusted and poetic vision is to be privileged over sight. Writing in the dark is "necessary" both for poetry to come into being and for life itself to continue: poems contain "words

³⁶² Levertov, *CEP*, 43.

³⁶³ Levertov, *CIB*, 101.

that may have the power / to make the sun rise again." This is a big claim and an important one in the context of this thesis since it brings literature and experience together. Their connection remains a focus throughout this chapter. In "Writing in the Dark" the future is uncertain — "who knows if morning will come" — and, likewise, it is out of uncertainty that the writer creates her art. The "depths of unknowing" are presented here as both a place of origin and a place from which language promises some relief. The speaker urges the writer,

[k]eep writing in the dark;
 a record of the night, or
 words that pulled you from depths of unknowing,
 words that flew through your mind, strange birds
 crying their urgency with human voices³⁶⁴

The "strange birds / crying their urgency with human voices" are images of the human imagination as it journeys through the "depths of unknowing." The "crying" that occurs in language can be read as a response to the challenge posed in "Standoff": "[t]he abyss gapes at us. / When shall we / dare to fly?"³⁶⁵ The "strange birds" dive into this abyss and, "crying their urgency," they give expression to the powerful human desire for transcendence. The imagination is also embodied elsewhere in the image of Pegasus. Levertov writes that "[t]he imagination is the horse's wings, a form of grace, unmerited, unattainable, amazing, and freely given. It is with awe that any who receive it must respond."³⁶⁶ Since it is neither true to say that humans are trapped in the world nor that they are able to rise above

³⁶⁴ Levertov, *CIB*, 101.

³⁶⁵ Levertov, *BW*, 67.

³⁶⁶ Levertov, "Horses with Wings", *NSE*, 119.

it, I want to consider the movement that occurs in a life that, as Rahner puts it, "is essentially ambivalent . . . is always exiled in the world and is always already beyond it."³⁶⁷ Rahner sees humans as a "mid-point suspended between the world and God, between time and eternity . . . a certain horizon and border between the corporeal and incorporeal."³⁶⁸ Human beings are not only situated at this "horizon"; they are constituted by it. In a commentary on Rahner, Doud writes that "[p]oetry reveals a capacity for the infinite which carries out ceaseless searching in the world, through matter."³⁶⁹ In poetry humans can explore "the infinite" within the world. Perhaps this is close to what is meant when a person recounts a transformative experience by saying "it broadened my horizons." A person is altered by the experience and instead of saying merely that he is different after the experience he says that he has become somehow more than he was. He does not mean that he is larger but that he nevertheless contains more as a result of his experience. Doud reflects on the desire to encompass the whole world in our selves:

[w]e ache for an act in which we can totalize ourselves as persons, while we also ache for a mode of acquisition in which all the world, all experience can be ours. Poetry gives us a provisional sense of the wholeness of self and world, while ever new data, configurations and appetitions cry out to us for an ever-renewed integration and interpretation.³⁷⁰

The suggestion here is that, although humans have a dynamic and "ever-renewed" relationship with the world, it is possible to glimpse something constant in it. Poetry offers "a provisional sense of the

³⁶⁷ Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych (London: Sheed, 1968) 406.

³⁶⁸ Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 407.

³⁶⁹ Robert E. Doud, "Poetry and Sensibility in the Vision of Karl Rahner." *Thought* 58.231(1983) 450.

wholeness of self and world." I wonder how much of this sense that any "wholeness" can only ever be "provisional" is due to the capacity of humans to recognise and accept the simultaneity of creation and destruction as it occurs in both language and experience. The constant element then might be this simultaneity. As I have already discussed, the transition in Levertov's poetry from symbolic language to the use of images, indicates her acknowledgement of the oscillation in language between representation and being. The image of the well is of particular interest to me because it traces the development of Levertov's thinking regarding the nature of poetry. In her later work she is aware that representation and being can only ever be considered as "provisional" since the experience in which they are discovered exceeds them both. Poetic vision occurs not in the dazzling light of day but in the darkness of the "depths of unknowing." As "Writing in the Dark" suggests,

[f]umble for the light, and you'll be
stark awake, but the vision
will be fading, slipping
out of reach.

Darkness is a requirement for poetic vision. In darkness things are not clearly delineated but more easily able to be perceived in their relationship with other things. Only when they have been perceived to be in relationship can they be transcended. Weil meditates on this aporia: "[e]xperience of the transcendent: [t]his seems contradictory, and yet the transcendent can be known only through contact, since

³⁷⁰ Doud, "Poetry and Sensibility," 450.

our faculties are unable to invent it."³⁷¹ How on earth does transcendence occur then? In the experience of poetry transcendence occurs when movement exceeds things. Specifically, it occurs when the activity of desire enables the perception of relationship, that is, the connectedness of things. In Levertov's later poetry, the image occurs as a transparent form in which this relationship can be glimpsed.

In his writings on the poetry of René Char, Blanchot claims that "[t]he image in a poem is not the designation of a thing, but the way in which the possession of this thing, or its destruction, is accomplished."³⁷² His emphasis is not upon the poet's capacity to encompass a thing but upon

the means found by the poet to live with it, on it, and against it, to come into substantial and material contact with it and to touch it in a unity of sympathy or a unity of disgust . . . the poetic image, in this very absence of thing, claims to restore the foundation of its presence to us, not its form (what one sees) but the underside (what one penetrates), its reality of earth.³⁷³

In "Writing in the Dark" the darkness itself is an image that is discovered through attentiveness, not to what is visible, but to what is "material and substantial." Just as Doud notes that "[p]oetry gives us a provisional sense of the wholeness of self and world," Blanchot describes the way people and things occur together in poetry as "a unity of sympathy or a unity of disgust." In darkness the "unity" of "absence" and "presence" is experienced. This "unity" is not an abstract category but an event and a distance, or form, in which its

³⁷¹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (New York: Octagon, 1979) 175.

³⁷² Blanchot, "René Char," *The Work of Fire*, 108.

"reality of earth" can be experienced. Blanchot believes that a thing is not what one sees but "what one penetrates." With this in mind, I want to return to Heidegger in the hope that his thinking can open a space in which darkness becomes the unseen backdrop against which writing occurs.

In Heideggerian language, the darkness in "Writing in the Dark" can be described as the unknowable "earth" into which humans are thrown. Gianni Vattimo contemplates Heidegger's relation of "earth" and "world," and concludes that Heidegger's readers often place insufficient emphasis on the side of "earth":

the earth is set forth by the work insofar as it is put forward, shown, as the obscure and thematically inexhaustible depths in which the world of the work is rooted. If, as we have seen, disorientation is essential to aesthetic experience, and not merely provisional, it owes far more to earth than to world.³⁷⁴

Heidegger views the work of art as rooted in the "obscure and thematically inexhaustible depths" of the earth. In Levertov's later poetry, images such as the darkness and the well do not occur as discrete objects or symbols. Rather, they are experienced as the "depths" or the "earth" of the poetry. Vattimo points out that, for Heidegger, earth "is not a system of signifying connections: it is other, the nothing, general gratuitousness and insignificance."³⁷⁵ Is insignificance, then, really the backdrop for Levertov's poetry? I would hate to think that this extended study of Levertov's imagery has been conducted only to arrive at the conclusion that the imagery is of no significance. Thankfully, in Heidegger's thinking, earth's

³⁷³ Blanchot, "René Char," 108.

³⁷⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, trans. David Webb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992) 53.

³⁷⁵ Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 53.

"insignificance" does not mean that thinking about it is a waste of time. On the contrary, "insignificance" or "the other, the nothing, general gratuitousness" is worthy of much thought. From my reading of philosophy, theory and literature I have gleaned the impression that this "nothing" is usually accompanied by a strong desire for "something." Where there is a lack there is also desire. This is beautifully expressed in the last stanza of Raymond Carver's poem, "The Gift":

This morning there's snow everywhere. We remark on it.
 You tell me you didn't sleep well. I say
 I didn't either. You had a terrible night. "Me too."
 We're extraordinarily calm and tender with each other
 as if sensing the other's rickety state of mind.
 As if we knew what the other was feeling. We don't,
 of course. We never do. No matter.
 It's the tenderness I care about. That's the gift
 this morning that moves and holds me.
 Same as every morning.³⁷⁶

It is impossible to know "what the other was feeling." Instead of being in possession of this knowledge the speaker finds himself suspended in "tenderness." Levertov is keen to use a form that is compatible with this simultaneous lack of knowledge and abundance of feeling. She remarks that,

[a]fter Einstein, the certainty about the future that people used to have was changed. The universe has turned out to be much less defined than we had thought — with hell below and heaven above — and we obviously live in a time of uncertainty . . . I think we should acknowledge the chaos we live in and deal with it; open forms can allow one to explore chaos and see what can be discovered there.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁶ Raymond Carver, *Ultramarine* (New York: Vintage, 1986) 140.

³⁷⁷ Levertov, "Denise," Estess, Brooker, *Conversations*, 93-4.

The "chaos we live in" is like the "terrible night" in Carver's poem and the "darkness" in "Writing in the Dark." Levertov's response to the "chaos" is to explore ways in which her relationship with the world can nevertheless be sustained. Her immense lack of certainty is matched by an immense desire for connection which finds expression in the form of poetry. I am loath to write of this desire for connection in Levertov's poetry without referring to the poems themselves because I believe this relationship can only be properly discussed in the context of its form, in this case, the experience of the poetry. Therefore, I will thread my observations regarding desire into an account of the rest of the poems I have chosen for discussion. In the rest of this chapter my aim is to focus on Levertov's image of the well in these later poems and to concentrate on the role of the well in Levertov's poetics. Having found a number of ways into Levertov's poetry and poetics I write, with a sense of closure, about the discoveries I have made regarding the convergence of Levertov's ethics and aesthetics in her poetry.

In "The Spirits Appeased" a wanderer arrives at a forest hut after a long journey.³⁷⁸ He finds evidence of someone's labours in the food, fire, clothes and bed that have been made for him. He never discovers exactly who this "someone" is, although he knows that the person is "someone wise":

A wanderer comes at last
to the forest hut where it was promised
someone wise would receive him.
And there's no one there; birds and small animals
flutter and vanish, then return to observe.
No human eyes meet his.

³⁷⁸ Levertov, *BW*, 8.

But in the hut there's food,
 set to keep warm beside glowing logs,
 and fragrant garments to fit him, replacing
 the rags of his journey,
 and a bed of heather from the hills.
 He stays there waiting. Each day the fire
 is replenished, the pot refilled while he sleeps.
 He draws up water from the well,
 writes of his travels, listens for footsteps.
 Little by little he finds
 the absent sage is speaking to him,
 is present.

The "sage" is both absent and present. Although "[n]o human eyes meet his," someone provides him with what he needs. His response is to wait, as though the mystery provider will appear eventually. While he "stays there waiting," he draws water from the well, writes and listens. These activities are followed by the realisation that someone is communicating with him: "[l]ittle by little he finds / the absent sage is speaking to him, / is present." The next line is positioned strongly, indented and occupying its own line: "[t]his is the way" announces a discovery and is reinforced by "the way" in the following line. The speaker steps into the poem and addresses the "someone wise" as "you." This presence is discovered on "the way" rather than in a face to face encounter:

This is the way
 you have spoken to me, the way — startled —
 I find I have heard you. When I need it,
 a book or a slip of paper
 appears in my hand, inscribed by yours: messages,
 waiting on cellar shelves, in forgotten boxes
 until I would listen.

Your spirits relax;
now she is looking, you say to each other,
now she begins to see.

The speaker is "startled" to "find I have heard you." Finding and being on the way are simultaneous: the finding takes place as a retrospective realisation that the absent "someone" was present. Discovery of this "someone" does not entail a physical meeting but occurs as a perception enabled by listening. When the speaker comments, "I find I have heard you," she testifies to the "messages" that have sustained her along the way. These messages were already present, and when she began to "listen" she was able to perceive them. Listening brings about vision, indicated by the final three lines: "[y]our spirits relax; / now she is looking, you say to each other, / now she begins to see." Vision comes about through a stance of attention rather than a plan of action. The attitude of the speaker is remarkably similar to Heidegger's stance, as described by Bruns, in relation to the history of thought:

Heidegger says, his own approach to the history of thinking is not an approach at all but a "step back," a refusal of appropriation and conceptual control in order to listen for what remains unthought and unspoken in all that comes down to us from the past. Thinking, Heidegger says, is not reasoning or questioning but listening; its goal is not conceptual representation but *Gelassenheit*, or a letting go, releasement, and "openness to the mystery."³⁷⁹

Although in this commentary "listening" is privileged over "questioning," Heidegger recommends that an attitude of questioning must accompany thinking at all times: "[t]he answer to the question, like every genuine answer, is only the final result of the last step in a long series of questions. Each answer remains in force as an answer

³⁷⁹ Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992) 158.

only as long as it is rooted in questioning."³⁸⁰ As Levertov's "The Gift" — the epigraph to this thesis — suggests, questions and answers are rolled up together.³⁸¹ Levertov asks many questions of poetry and the poet. For example, in her essay "Origins of a Poem," she enquires, "[w]hat is the task of the poet? What is the essential nature of his work? Are these not questions we too often fail to ask ourselves, as we blindly pursue some form of poetic activity?" Her manner of exploration, too, is grounded in a spirit of further questioning.³⁸² This is not an unusual stance for a poet to take. Valéry, for example, asks, "[i]s it impossible, given time, care, skill, and desire, to proceed in an orderly way to arrive at poetry?"³⁸³ Heidegger's "listening" helps distinguish questions based on "reasoning" from questions that arise out of "a refusal of appropriation and conceptual control."³⁸⁴ This "step back" is Heidegger's attempt to let the work speak for itself. This is not to expect the work to explain or justify itself but to recognise that the work is an opening that cannot be clarified in full by humans. The listening in "The Spirits Appeased" is not a listening out for anything in particular, but an act of attention to the surrounding world. Drawing water from the well is the first of a series of actions the wanderer carries out while he waits and listens. The central position of the line "[h]e draws up water from the well" adds to the sense that the wanderer's actions are central to the experience of the poem. His

³⁸⁰ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 70-1.

³⁸¹ Levertov, *SW*, 18.

³⁸² Levertov, "Origins of a Poem," *PIW*, 44.

³⁸³ Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, 173.

³⁸⁴ Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, 158.

receptivity and his faithful response deepens the connection he experiences with his environment.

In the final ten lines the speaker addresses a non-specified "you." The shadowy quality of "you" emphasises the mysterious nature of the wanderer's relationship with his surroundings. The wanderer has no destination except in the form of an arrival that always occurs. The poem ends with a comparison between his listening and the speaker's own communication with what she terms "you":

This is the way
you have spoken to me, the way — startled —
I find I have heard you. When I need it,
a book or a slip of paper
appears in my hand, inscribed by yours: messages,
waiting on cellar shelves, in forgotten boxes
until I would listen.

Your spirits relax;
now she is looking, you say to each other,
now she begins to see.

The speaker's listening enables her to perceive what already exists in "messages, waiting on cellar shelves, in forgotten boxes." Listening is a kind of prayer that does not request anything but makes possible the perception of the world's gifts. The speaker is "startled" to find that she is being spoken to. Given that this speaking occurs in "messages" that already exist, it makes sense for Derrida to suggest that "the pure prayer demands only that the other hear it, receive it, be present to it, be the other as such, a gift, call, and even cause of prayer."³⁸⁵ Derrida proposes that, instead of prayer bringing forth gifts, the gifts that already exist in the world bring about prayer. This is not to say that prayer cannot bring about change. In fact, this is

precisely where its power lies. The important point that Levertov and Derrida make is that the poet, the one who prays, is transformed in the event of writing and of prayer. In Levertov's view, writing, like prayer, can make a poet more aware of her experience and can therefore create inner changes that manifest in the world. Levertov comments on the similarity between writing and prayer:

I was really amazed at how close the exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola were to a poet or novelist imagining a scene. You focus your attention on some particular aspect of the life of Christ. You try to compose that scene in your imagination, place yourself there. If it's the Via Dolorosa, you have to ask yourself, are you one of the disciples? Are you a passerby? Are you a spectator that likes to watch from the side, the way people used to watch hangings? You establish who you are and where you stand and then you look at what you see.³⁸⁶

Poetic vision, like spiritual vision, is possible when the "imagination" focuses "attention" on a "scene" to the extent that the scene itself comes into focus. Levertov encourages the poet to ask questions of herself in order to be able to experience the scene: "establish who you are and where you stand and then you look at what you see." Poetic and spiritual vision are alike in the way both encounter things by looking into them rather than at them: as Levertov puts it, "[t]he strawness of straw, the humanness of the human, is their divinity."³⁸⁷ "The Spirits Appeased" is a poetic account of how this vision occurs. Although the wanderer is not able to catch sight of the sage who provides for him, he remains receptive and attentive to what he is given. He "draws up water from the well," "writes of his travels" and

³⁸⁵ Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," 41.

³⁸⁶ Levertov, "Denise Levertov," interview by Nicholas O'Connell, *At the Field's End: Interviews with 22 Pacific Northwest Writers*, ed. Nicholas O'Connell (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1998) 346.

³⁸⁷ Levertov, "Origins of a Poem," *PIW*, 51.

"listens for footsteps." He is in the dark regarding the precise location and characteristics of the sage and yet he remains receptive and attentive to the sage's mysterious voice until "[l]ittle by little he finds / the absent sage is speaking to him, / is present." The sage is neither entirely absent nor entirely present. Rather, his presence occurs in his absence. If this makes no logical sense, it is not meant to, and that's why it qualifies as an aporia. In the same way that in poetry the wanderer's presence occurs in his absence, the poet discovers answers within questions.

The wanderer's desire to see the sage and the poet's desire to know the answers to her questions reminds me of Blanchot's "double infidelity" or "breach" that occurs in the absence of God. One way to approach "The Spirits Appeased" is to consider that the desire for the sage's presence and the impossibility of experiencing it, except as an absence, situates the wanderer at what Blanchot would call the "abyss."³⁸⁸ A place of great vitality, the abyss is a place in which humans can respond to absence with faith rather than despair. Blanchot's comments on the abyss are probably the closest he comes to professing a faith that could be called religious:

The abyss is reserved for mortals. But it is not only the empty abyss; it is the savage and eternally living deep from which the gods are preserved. They preserve us from it, but they do not reach it as we do. And so it is rather in the heart of man, symbol of crystalline purity, that the truth of the reversal can be fulfilled. It is man's heart that must become the place where light tests itself most severely, the intimacy where the echo of the empty deep becomes speech.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁸ Blanchot uses the word "abyss" after Hölderlin. See Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 275.

³⁸⁹ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 275-6.

The image of a "savage and eternally living deep" is strikingly similar to the images of depth, such as the well, that occur in Levertov's poetry. The connection between Blanchot and Levertov is most obvious in their shared emphasis on "man's heart" as a place where transformation can occur. Blanchot states that "[t]he abyss is reserved for mortals." Humans are intimate with the abyss in a way that the gods are not. Although humans know well the distance in which their desire occurs, they are nevertheless compelled to know more about the limits and possibilities of this mysterious, undefined space. Desire generates desire. The desire to know about the source and fulfilment of the abyss can also be expressed as the human desire to know, in Levertov's words, "who you are and where you stand." This question that poetry asks of humans has the same circularity as human desire at the abyss. Neither the fulfilment of human desire nor the answers to poetry's questions can be realized anywhere else but at their impenetrable source. The mystery of human being and of poetry seems also to be its fascination. Blanchot's abyss and Levertov's well are formless forms in which humans can recognise themselves as similarly deep and unknown. In the poems that remain, Levertov's image of the well is not a destination but an arrival. Throughout all of the poetry, the well image deals with relationship, yet in the later poems discussed in this chapter the well is itself a relationship.

"The Stricken Children" expresses fear at the possibility that children are losing the capacity to connect with the world around

them.³⁹⁰ The poem ends on a note of disappointment and uncertainty. I want to probe the experience of the speaker to gain an understanding of the nature of her disappointment. After all, the well in these other later poems is a form that provides sustenance even in the face of such things as "sickness," "soiled bandages" and an "acheing unconsciousness":

The Wishing Well was a spring
 bubbling clear and soundless into a shallow pool
 less than three feet across, a hood of rocks
 protecting it, smallest of grottoes, from falling leaves,
 the pebbles of past wishes peacefully under-water, old desires
 forgotten or fulfilled. No one threw money in, one had to search
 for the right small stone.

This was the place from which
 year after year in childhood I demanded my departure,
 my journeying forth into the world of magical
 cities, mountains, otherness — the place which gave
 what I asked, and more; to which
 still wandering, I returned this year, as if
 to gaze once more at the face
 of an ancient grandmother.
 And I found the well
 filled to the shallow brim
 with debris of a culture's sickness —
 with bottles, tins, paper, plastic —
 the soiled bandages
 of its acheing unconsciousness.

Does the clogged spring still moisten
 the underlayer of waste?
 Was it children threw in the rubbish?
 Children who don't dream, or dismiss
 their own desires and
 toss them down, discarded packaging?
 I move away, walking fast, the impetus
 of so many journeys pushes me on,
 but where are the stricken children of this time, this place,
 to travel to, in Time if not in Place,
 the grandmother wellspring choked, and themselves not aware
 of all they are doing-without?

³⁹⁰ Levertov, *BW*, 33.

An abundant source of inspiration, the well fuelled the speaker's imagination and helped her to make the journeys that her life demanded. During these journeys, when she was physically distant from the well, she remained connected with it as one remains connected to "an ancient grandmother." Returning to the well as an adult is a sorrowful experience for her since she finds, not "a spring / bubbling clear and soundless," but a site that has been discarded and polluted. The speaker views the culture's "acheing unconsciousness" as connected with its inability to acknowledge its own desires. The final stanza of the poem is a sequence of four questions expressing the speaker's concern about the fate of children who are not able to access the well's gifts. This uncertain, open-ended stanza encourages the reader to wonder about the impact of this loss. How will the children experience "the world of magical / cities, mountains, otherness" that the speaker inhabited? The lack of "otherness" is perceived by the speaker to be a cause for concern, a major impediment in the lives of the children.

When I focus my attention on the speaker's own experience, rather than on her opinions about the younger generation, it is possible to witness the answers to her own questions bubble up, as if from her own "grandmother wellspring." She discovers that a return to the past, with its "old desires" and "magical / cities" and "mountains," is impossible. This refusal at the site of the "ancient grandmother" is painful. The "place from which / year after year in childhood I demanded my departure . . . the place which gave / what I asked, and more" is not what it used to be. It is still a "well" but it is

different now. The shock and disappointment felt by the speaker finds expression in the questions she asks:

Does the clogged spring still moisten
the underlayer of waste?
Was it children threw in the rubbish?
Children who don't dream, or dismiss
their own desires and
toss them down, discarded packaging?
I move away, walking fast, the impetus
of so many journeys pushes me on,
but where are the stricken children of this time, this place,
to travel to, in Time if not in Place,
the grandmother wellspring choked, and themselves not aware
of all they are doing-without?

Fortunately, though, there is still energy in the speaker's step: "I move away, walking fast, the impetus / of so many journeys pushes me on." In these lines is the conviction that her journey will not be stalled by this experience. Although she finds that the well is no longer a place of departure into "the world of magical / cities, mountains, otherness," she experiences a second departure: "walking fast" she is helped by the momentum of her "many journeys." She feels compassion for children who may never get the chance to experience "otherness" and then she continues on her way. Like the generation, in "Desolate Light," that looks into "the open / well of centuries," "knowing / too much to reasonably hope," she is herself "stricken" with the knowledge that a return is impossible. Return does occur, however, in her desire for it. Blanchot would perhaps say that the well is present in its absence, and the speaker's return occurs as its own impossibility. Within her desire for return there is still space for the speaker to "move away" into the distance. Her desire is not a closed loop but an opening in which she discovers that her

horizons have broadened, that she is somehow more than she used to be.

In "The Well" the speaker tries to manipulate her environment in order to achieve fearsome beauty. She fails to obtain what she wants but discovers "some other power" when she surrenders to sleep and dreams:

At sixteen I believed the moonlight
could change me if it would.

I moved my head
on the pillow, even moved my bed
as the moon slowly
crossed the open lattice.

I wanted beauty, a dangerous
gleam of steel, my body thinner,
my pale face paler.

I moonbathed
diligently, as others sunbathe.
But the moon's unsmiling stare
kept me awake. Mornings,
I was flushed and cross.

It was on dark nights of deep sleep
that I dreamed the most, sunk in the well,
and woke rested, and if not beautiful,
filled with some other power.

During "dark nights of deep sleep" she is "sunk in the well." She dreams and emerges from the night empowered rather than tired and cranky. For Levertov, dreaming and creating works of art are almost the same thing:

I know what Picasso meant — "To draw is to close the eyes and sing." The pursuit of the right shade of color, the exact chord, the precise word — oh yes, that's part of it. But for those who have the luck to be engaged — by nature, by their natures, their destinies — is there any pleasure deeper, more seductive, than that painful search? And only a rare critic who happens also to be, if not an artist himself, then a good dreamer by night, will ever believe it. Working at art is so

much like dreaming, sometimes I don't know which is which.³⁹¹

Being "a good dreamer by night" goes hand in hand with the capacity to "close the eyes and sing" while one is awake. "The Well" celebrates the rewards of learning to let go of one's own designs. The speaker's plans for control give way to the depth and darkness of "sleep" and "dreams." The link between dreaming and writing poetry is clearly the imagination. And yet the link is a complex interplay of active and passive elements. While Levertov celebrates the link, she also acknowledges the difficulty involved in pursuing "the right shade of color, the exact chord, the precise word." The search for what is "right," "exact" and "precise" is not a simple matter of deciding where to look and what to select. In fact, it's not a matter of looking at all but of listening. Only when the eyes are closed does the singing occur. How, then, can this experience be approached? Levertov reflects on the immense contradictions involved in listening when she asks, "is there any pleasure deeper, more seductive, than that painful search?" There are passive and active components to "this painful search" and it seems that the passivity of dreaming and the activity of the imagination complement one another. The elements of the search are many, and much time can be spent exploring them. However, what I want to know before the end of this thesis is *why do we search in the first place?* As I have already outlined, there is no point in trying to find a single answer to this question. The only way out of it is to look further into

³⁹¹ Levertov, "Working and Dreaming," 1970, *PIW*, 216. Also see Peter Steele's poem, "Dreaming a Poem" in his *Marching on Paradise* (Melbourne: Longman, 1984) 21-3.

it. This is the kind of impasse that constitutes dreaming and writing poetry. Levertov proposes a way of dealing with this situation:

[t]o imagine goodness and beauty, to point them out as we perceive them in art, nature, or our fellows, and to create works that celebrate them — are essential incentives to finding a route out of our apparent impasse.³⁹²

Just as she perceives similarities in the way art and dreaming occur, she also perceives similarities in “art, nature” and “our fellows.” She believes that their connections can be realised when we discern “goodness and beauty” in them and “create works that celebrate them.” Creativity, in this context, is the effort of discerning what is good and beautiful in the world and helping to celebrate it. According to Levertov’s question, “is there any pleasure deeper, more seductive, than that painful search?” the effort is undertaken partly because of the “pleasure” entailed. When I think of something that involves this degree of pleasure and pain I cannot help but think of the experience of “love.” Lyn Hatherly’s “Love Burns” summarises this simultaneity better than any work I have encountered so far:

Pedalling his blue trike to every letterbox in Eden Street
 he piled the day’s papers in the tray,
 my three year old son, with his milky teeth,
 and pumped the booty home, intent
 on a bonfire. At seven he wagered the right
 to smoke, puffed a cigar
 long and brown as his hand. I can still
 see him — he didn’t
 cough. Thirteen
 and I looked up, then ran
 he rolled over, over, on the summer grass.

³⁹² Levertov, “Poetry, Prophecy, Survival,” *NSE*, 143.

He was dancing, ripping off the jeans
that drew the flames,
and smoke rising on terrible wings.

His skin peeled off with the cloth,
great chunks of thin leg on the black earth.
Air invaded the gaps in his flesh, in his fat.
I never knew air could hurt so much.

I couldn't even hold him.
In shock we drove too fast
stopping only when pain
exploded and he leapt about like someone
circling a fire built to spook animals
or demons.

Morphine doused the rage in his veins
and I stopped shivering.
He remembers he saw his future
flashing in lit frames. Twenty years on
he still dreams, and he still burns.
For the flames flare like blood
and he stretches his arms out for me,
then runs to fuel the fire again.³⁹³

The speaker's admission, "I never knew air could hurt so much" is a pivotal statement. Apart from being positioned centrally, it contains the core concerns that, for the speaker, are involved in the experience of love. The air is something that until now the speaker seems to have taken for granted. She did not expect something so seemingly benign, not to mention invisible, to inflict such pain. It is difficult to realise that the air which sustains life can also cause immense suffering. The speaker's love for the boy makes it especially difficult to witness his trauma. His young body, even his protective fat, is savaged by "the flames." The relationship between the speaker and the boy is characterised by both pleasure and pain. Again, Levertov's

question regarding the pleasurable and painful search echoes alongside this exploration of love. If Heidegger were to comment on “earth” and “world” in this contradictory situation, he would most likely say that love is the earth or the backdrop against which the relationship is presented. While new discoveries are made within the relationship between the speaker and the boy, the backdrop of love against which the relationship occurs remains constant. There is no doubt that the speaker perceives the relationship in terms of love. The title itself announces that love is the subject at hand. However, love is not easy to define and it involves not only the pleasure the word evokes but also great pain. Although the speaker is sure that she is experiencing love, she is shocked and shaken by the realisation that the experience of love involves being open to, and thereby exposing herself to the risk of, whatever lies just around the corner.

Levertov’s “Venerable Optimist” gives a short and sweet account of the universe according to an unnamed “[o]ptimist.” Life is a torn cloth through which “silver light” can be perceived:

He saw the dark as a ragged garment
spread out to air.
Through its rents and moth-holes
The silver light came pouring.³⁹⁴

The garment’s tears enable the speaker’s perception of the luminous reality behind them. This is a classic example of Levertov’s search for “goodness and beauty.” The speaker uses her imagination to find the “goodness and beauty” in the darkness. For Levertov, the imagination is not just a tool that is used in the creation of works of

³⁹³ Lyn Hatherly, “Love Burns,” *New Music: An Anthology of Contemporary Australian Poetry*, ed. John Leonard (Woollongong: Five Islands P, 2001) 154-5.

art. It is, ultimately, a power that can ensure the survival of the world. In the case that this sounds like an exaggerated claim, I want to recall the equally big claim in the final lines of "Writing in the Dark." The speaker declares that the fruits of the writer's efforts are "words that may have the power / to make the sun rise again." The writer's awareness of her deepest desires and most potent dreams equips her to imagine a world in which these powerful forces are channeled into finding and preserving the "goodness and beauty" in her relationship with the world. In "Love Burns" there is no question about the value of love. The speaker is not about to forgo love in order to save herself pain. Love is a non-negotiable and irreducible reality that is present even in the young boy's terrible wounds. Love continues to "burn" — "[t]wenty years on / he still dreams, and he still burns" — and where there are human bonds of love there is also a strange mix of pleasure and pain. Even when the boy grows into an adult, he is still required to risk himself in the experience of relationship with the speaker and with the world: "the flames flare like blood / and he stretches his arms out for me, / then runs to fuel the fire again." He reaches into the space of relationship, a distance in which he searches for something. In asking "for me" he is fuelling love's fire. He cannot possess the speaker but he can discover within his own reach the cruel yet beautiful presence of love. I can almost hear the narrator of Marguerite Duras's *The Malady of Death*, emphasising slowly love's seductiveness as well as its agony:

[p]erhaps you'd look for her outside your room, on the beaches, outside cafés, in the streets. But you wouldn't be

³⁹⁴ Levertov, *ET*, 52.

able to find her, because in the light of day you can't recognize her. All you know of her is her sleeping body beneath her shut or half-shut eyes. The penetration of one body by another — that you can't recognize, ever. You couldn't ever . . . When you wept it was just over yourself and not because of the marvelous impossibility of reaching her through the difference that separates you.³⁹⁵

I can understand why Levertov refers to writing as a form of prayer. Both involve a search or a question, and both embody the quintessential and "marvelous impossibility" of arriving at certainty. The listening that occurs in poetry and in prayer is an experience of relationship, or an opening in which love occurs. Neither poetry nor prayer can force anything to happen. They are practices which enable, rather than enforce, vision. The difference between enabling and enforcing is dealt with in Levertov's "Misnomer."³⁹⁶

In this poem a contrast is set up between "the arts" and "war," each obtaining their energy from vastly different sources:

They speak of the art of war,
but the arts
draw their light from the soul's well,
and warfare
dries up the soul and draws its power
from a dark and burning wasteland.
When Leonardo
set his genius to devising
machines of destruction he was not
acting in the service of art,
he was suspending
the life of art
over an abyss,
as if one were to hold
a living child out of an airplane window
at thirty thousand feet.

³⁹⁵ Marguerite Duras, *The Malady of Death*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Grove, 1986) 54.

³⁹⁶ Levertov, *ET*, 79.

The arts rely on a well that is a site of strength, healing and peace. War, on the other hand, threatens to destroy art. War turns its back on "the soul's well" and consequently its actions are destructive. In its blindness to the power of the well, war attacks not only art but everything in its wake. In "Two Speeches About Survival and a Message to Children, 1980" Levertov writes,

[o]ur very survival is in the balance...And all of us should think deeply about what it means to be a human being, and realize that we cannot attain our beautiful common goals, our vision of justice and compassion for all, by arrogantly violating our Mother, the Earth. Our future depends upon our developing a different sense of values.³⁹⁷

While war is a blind scramble for domination, the arts are known for their patient examination of and concern for "values." Levertov perceives the need for "a different sense of values" if "our vision of justice and compassion for all" is to be realised. As she sees it, thinking "deeply about what it means to be a human being" is necessary for "[o]ur very survival." In a commentary on Williams, Charles Doyle writes, "[i]n the long run, love is the important emotion in human experience. What keeps man alive (or kills him, for that matter) is his own imagination and how it relates to the world. Imagination has the power of transforming or maintaining the world, and is the chief metamorphic agent."³⁹⁸ Here the ongoing link between the imagination and the world is what "keeps man alive." What occurs in this relationship is the concern of the arts. For Levertov, "our beautiful common goals" are nurtured by a faithful and attentive relationship between the imagination and the world.

³⁹⁷ Levertov, *LUC*, 181.

For Williams, this relationship is where "love" occurs. The arts, then, explores the relationship between humans and the world, and searches for ways in which humans can help to make this relationship one that works. That is, the arts is also an ethics that envisages a future in which human relationships with the world can be sustained. According to Derrida, the act of reading is also an act of love. He remarks that,

[o]ne cannot read without opening oneself to the desire of language, to the search for that which remains absent and other than oneself. Without a certain love of the text, no reading would be possible. In every reading there is a *corps-à-corps* between reader and text, an incorporation of the reader's desire into the desire of the text.³⁹⁹

Language and experience cannot be separated since they share this desire for "that which remains absent and other than oneself." Reading is not simply a task in which something is obtained. It is a process that requires "a certain love of the text." As Levertov sees it, poetry and experience can never be separated as though they were fused objects: "for the poet, for the man who makes literature, there is no such thing as an isolated study of literature. . . . the understanding of a result is incomplete if there is ignorance of its process."⁴⁰⁰ The process, or the experience, can be seen as the form that literature takes. While poetry is a specialized form of literature, Levertov recognises that poetry's form is constituted not by its conventions but by the activity that sustains it. Valéry's statement

³⁹⁸ Charles Doyle, *William Carlos Williams and the American Poem* (New York: St Martin's P, 1982) 177.

³⁹⁹ Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other," interview with Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984) 126.

⁴⁰⁰ Levertov, "The Poet in the World," *NSE*, 134.

that “[w]hat is ‘form’ for anyone else is ‘content’ for me,” could be a comment regarding Levertov’s last two collections of poetry.⁴⁰¹ Levertov’s interest in form at this stage in her career is matched by her curiosity about the spiritual implications of writing poetry. I imagine she would concur with Weil, who asserts that “[w]e always look upon aesthetics as a special branch of study, whereas it is actually the key to supernatural truths.”⁴⁰² In poetry Levertov experiences a creative and a spiritual relationship with the world. The examination, in “Misnomer,” of the profound differences between art and war, is the kind of attentive approach that the arts gives its serious consideration and that war overlooks. “Misnomer” appears in Levertov’s penultimate collection of poems, *Evening Train*. The poems in this and her final collection, *Sands of the Well*, are forms of listening. Like the garment’s “rents and moth-holes” in the “Venerable Optimist,” they are themselves luminous openings in which the poet experiences relationship with the world. Levertov affirms that “[w]riting itself can be a religious act, if one allows oneself to be put at its service. I don’t mean to make a religion of poetry, no. But certainly we can assume what poetry is *not* — it is definitely not just an anthropocentric act.”⁴⁰³ The image of the well, in the last two collections, is a space or a distance in which Levertov affirms her relationship with God.

So, for example, although “Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis”⁴⁰⁴ does not feature a well as such, it describes the experience of

⁴⁰¹ Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, 183.

⁴⁰² Weil, *Notebooks*, 627.

⁴⁰³ Levertov, “Denise,” Estess, Brooker, *Conversations*, 96.

⁴⁰⁴ Levertov, *ET*, 114.

“[s]ublime acceptance” as something that “welled / up from those depths where purpose / drifted for mortal moments.” The verb “welled” suggests a vast source of sustenance and strength that humans can access given the right conditions. “Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis” deals with the intense dread that Jesus experienced prior to the Crucifixion:

Maybe He looked indeed
 Much as Rembrandt envisioned Him
 in those small heads that seem in fact
 portraits of more than a model.
 A dark, still young, very intelligent face,
 a soul-mirror gaze of deep understanding, unjudging.
That face, in extremis, would have clenched its teeth
 in a grimace not shown in even the great crucifixions.
 The burden of humanness (I begin to see) exacted from Him
 that He taste also the humiliation of dread,
 cold sweat of wanting to let the whole thing go,
 like any mortal hero out of his depth,
 like anyone who has taken a step too far
 and wants herself back.
 The painters, even the greatest, don't show how,
 in the midnight Garden,
 or staggering uphill under the weight of the Cross,
 He went through with even the human longing
 to simply cease, to not be.
 Not torture of body,
 not the hideous betrayals human commit
 nor the faithless weakness of friends, and surely
 not the anticipation of death (not then, in agony's grip)
 was Incarnation's heaviest weight,
 but this sickened desire to renege,
 to step back from what He, Who was God,
 had promised Himself, and had entered
 time and flesh to enact.
 Sublime acceptance, to be absolute, had to have welled
 up from those depths where purpose
 drifted for mortal moments.

God experiences the “burden of humanness” and finds himself suddenly “out of his depth.” He feels the distinctly mortal “desire to renege, / to step back from what He, Who was God, / had promised

Himself, and had entered / time and flesh to enact." He feels stretched beyond his own capacities, "out of his depth, / like anyone who has taken a step too far / and wants herself back." It comes as a shock to him to experience "the humiliation of dread," the "cold sweat of wanting to let the whole thing go" and "even the human longing / to simply cease, to not be." He wants to undo his own mortality and yet within his humanness, in "those depths where purpose / drifted for mortal moments," he discovers that his experience, like the "ragged garment" in the "Venerable Optimist," opens out to an otherness that sustains the world and him in it. Far from being an obstacle which prevents the perception of God, humanness turns out to be a form in which relationship with him is already occurring.

Like the "depths of unknowing" in "Writing in the Dark," the "depths where purpose / drifted for mortal moments" are the dark intervals in human experience where intentionality and representation break down. In these depths humans find themselves somehow suspended. In a prayer by Michael Leunig the speaker expresses bewildered gratitude for the fact that he is suspended in a world full of useful tools:

We give thanks for the invention of the handle. Without it there would many things we couldn't hold on to. As for the things we can't hold on to anyway, let us gracefully accept their ungraspable nature and celebrate all things elusive, fleeting and intangible. They mystify us and make us receptive to truth and beauty. We celebrate and give thanks.
Amen.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁵ Michael Leunig, *The Prayer Tree* (Melbourne: Dove, 1991) n. pag.

The speaker's response to "elusive, fleeting and / intangible" things is to "celebrate and give thanks." His receptivity to "truth and beauty" is not simply a stance he decides to take in order to see things in a more positive light. It is a chance that he discovers in his experience of things that "mystify" him. His response is not a theoretical plan but a living moment-by-moment decision. Glück warns that "when response becomes policy it has ceased to engage directly with circumstance."⁴⁰⁶ While handles and other tools are wonderfully useful, it is mistaken to think they can meet all of our needs. At some point circumstance calls for "acceptance" rather than solutions.

Acceptance is highly valued in the work of Williams and Schweitzer, both of whom are deeply appreciative of mystery as it occurs in flesh and blood experience. Both are writers and medical doctors who apprehend a transcendence that occurs in their everyday practice. Williams writes,

I was permitted by my medical badge to follow the poor, defeated body into those gulfs and grottos. And the astonishing thing is that at such times and in such places — foul as they may be with the stinking ischio-rectal abscesses of our comings and goings — just there, the thing, in all its greatest beauty, may for a moment be freed to fly for a moment guiltily about the room. In illness, in the permission I as a physician have had to be present at deaths and births, at the tormented battles between daughter and diabolic mother, shattered by a gone brain — just there — for a split second — from one side or the other, it has fluttered before me for a moment, a phrase which I quickly write down on anything at hand, any piece of paper I can grab . . . It is an indefinable thing, and its characteristic, its chief character is that it is sure, all of a piece and, as I have said, instant and perfect: it comes,

⁴⁰⁶ Glück, *Proofs and Theories*, 134.

it is there, and it vanishes. But I have seen it, clearly. I have seen it. I know it because there it is.⁴⁰⁷

In his work with "the poor, defeated body" Williams has experienced the recognition of something that he describes as "an indefinable thing" and "the thing, in all its greatest beauty." The instant in which this "thing" is perceived is experienced by Williams as a fleeting movement. He observes that "for a split second — from one side or the other, it has fluttered before me for a moment," "instant and perfect: it comes, it is there, and it vanishes." It is not as though he has discerned an object in a dark corner of the room. The distance between himself and the "thing" is not a physical distance but an opening in his experience that is characterised by an invisible, desiring movement. For Williams, medicine and poetry offer the same experience of transcendence.

In *The Enigma of Health*, Gadamer asserts that "[w]e can learn a great deal from the experience of our own embodied nature . . . It reveals the rhythm of sleeping and waking, the rhythm of illness and recovery, and finally, at the end, the transition into nothingness, the expiring movement of life itself."⁴⁰⁸ Levertov perceives this "embodied nature" in both physical bodies and in poetry. She draws attention to the "gravity" that conditions bodies and poetry alike:

To say that the poem, as well as the poet, is animal means that it has its own flesh and blood and is not a rarified and insubstantial thing. It is compact of sounds, guttural or sibilant, round or thin, lilting or abrupt, in all their play of pitch and rhythm, durations and varied pace, their dance in

⁴⁰⁷ William Carlos Williams, *The William Carlos Williams Reader*, ed. M.L. Rosenthal (New York: New Directions, 1966) 307-8.

⁴⁰⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, trans. Jason Gaiger and Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity, 1996) 78.

and with silence. Even its marriage to the Euclidean beauty of syntax is a passionate and very physical love affair; often it pulls the gravity and abstract elegance of grammar into that dance to whirl like a Maenad.⁴⁰⁹

The poem and the poet are "animal" to the extent that they are "flesh and blood." Poetry is a "very physical love affair" and a "dance in and with silence." When body and spirit connect they "dance" and "whirl like a Maenad." Of course, while poetry is "animal" it also raises distinctly human concerns. Gadamer makes the point that "thanks to the possession of language, human society is wholly different in range and character from the society of animals, 'since a dialogue is what we are, being able to listen to one another,' as Hölderlin expresses it."⁴¹⁰ The nuances of "animal" are different in the statements of Levertov and Gadamer. Taken together these comments provide a way into a consideration of the activity, both corporeal and incorporeal, that sustains poetry.

Levertov's use of "animal" reflects her ideas about poetry's "flesh and blood" and the futility of treating poetry as "a rarified and insubstantial thing." In Gadamer's view, an "animal" misses out on the experience of community as it manifests in language, ethics, religion, culture, art and history:

The entire foundation of our life-world through the construction of an ethical order, as well as the development of religious and cultural traditions, can be traced back to the ultimate miracle of language. This does not consist in the ability to signal to one another, in order to regulate the behaviour of the species, but in the ability to form a particular language community and thereby a common world. What is new is the ability to listen to one another, the capacity to attend to another human being.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁹ Levertov, "Horses with Wings," *NSE*, 119.

⁴¹⁰ Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health*, 166.

⁴¹¹ Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health*, 166-7.

The "miracle of language" is a "listening" that enables "an ethical order" and "the development of religious and cultural traditions." For Levertov and Gadamer poetry is miraculous because it is a relationship in which humans are given the opportunity to experience contact with the world and transcendence within that contact. When Levertov asserts that "there is a way of looking at Christian faith as involving the cooperation of man" she emphasises the importance of the human stance in this relationship.⁴¹² Poetry helps her to share in Weil's belief that "[t]he apparent absence of God in this world is the actual reality of God."⁴¹³ It is the human response to this situation that enables the perception of "the actual reality."

This is where Schweitzer's thought is important in Levertov's poetics. He declares that,

[a] man is truly ethical only when he obeys the compulsion to help all life which he is able to assist, and shrinks from injuring anything that lives. He does not ask how far this or that life deserves one's sympathy as being valuable, nor, beyond that, whether and to what degree it is capable of feeling. Life as such is sacred to him.⁴¹⁴

Ethics is not simply a matter of acting in a certain way. For Schweitzer, its action arises out of the "feeling" that "[l]ife as such is sacred." The "compulsion to help all life" is linked closely with the experience of love. As "Love Burns" demonstrates, the love for another life is not easily felt nor is it easily translated into action. Schweitzer emphasises the importance of thinking, feeling, being and acting in a way that honours one's own life in relationship with the

⁴¹² Levertov, "An Interview with Denise Levertov," interview with Lorrie Smith, 1984, Brooker, *Conversations*, 141.

⁴¹³ Weil, *Notebooks*, 424.

lives of others. He believes that "[o]nly he who in deepened devotion to his own will-to-live experiences inward freedom from outward occurrences, is capable of devoting himself in profound and steady fashion to the life of others."⁴¹⁵ Ethics comes back always to one's own experience and, specifically, one's capacity to experience "inward freedom from outward occurrences." Only when this is cultivated can a person begin to look outward. If an individual attempts to devote energy to others she must be ready to look inward and outward at once. Looking only outward is a recipe for disappointment since, under these circumstances, understanding can only ever be abstract. Schweitzer writes that "[m]an becomes happy when, besides belonging to the universe naturally, he also surrenders himself to it consciously and willingly, and loses himself spiritually within it."⁴¹⁶ This is echoed, in different words, in his statements that "[a]bstraction is the death of ethics, for ethics are a living relationship to living life" and "[t]he only reality is the Being which manifests itself in phenomena."⁴¹⁷ To make an abstraction of ethics is to lose sight of the fact that ethics is "a living relationship to living life." For a poet or a doctor, abstraction is a danger to their practice. In the same way that the subject cannot control experience, the poet nor the doctor can control the outcome of their efforts. Health, for example, is something that can be nurtured, but to hold it up as an ideal that can always be achieved by following certain rules is to court frustration. Health, like language, carries its own dissolution within

⁴¹⁴ Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, 3rd ed (London: Black, 1946) 243.

⁴¹⁵ Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, 247.

⁴¹⁶ Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, 115.

⁴¹⁷ Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, 237.

it. There is no ideal state of health just as there is no perfect language. The category "health" cannot be sustained by experience. Rather, experience is sustained by the failure of such a category.

The concepts of poetry and health are the subject of Steele's playful poem "The Other Side." Here Steele describes the poetry section of a bookstore, in which the speaker feels stifled and impatient with the books that fail to deliver what he wants. He concludes that the poetry section is "no place for a grown man" and goes in search of "health" on the busy streets:

Out of the mouths of babes and bookstore attendants
tumble approximations to truth:
last month, for instance, asked where Poetry was,
one said, "On the other side of Health."

Conquering an inevitable temptation
to ask for gown and mask, I stepped
among mortality's exhibitors:
and there, as the book-person had said,

they were, alternately febrile and pallid, complaining
of everything from the fall of cities
to the drowning of cats, from the whitening of hair
to the darkening of lambent faith.

Pathetic, it was — a bloody disgrace. They'd had,
every last one of them, good educations,
if sometimes in peculiar company,
and they'd clearly knocked about with the mighty —

Cromwell, and God, the Queen of Bohemia, Hooker,
the Prince of Darkness, Hector and Helen —
but the whole thing was wasted on them. For page
after lamenting page they went on,

counting their curses, making dates with grief,
keeping a tally of old scars —
heart-nicks, brain-bruises, the sprains
that go, we all know, with the game.

It was no place for a grown man, so I went
 out to the hustling street, relieved
 to be in the action once more, the blaze of noon,
 the loud cars, and all that health.⁴¹⁸

He responds to the poetry's brokenness by turning his back on it as though he too will crumble if he spends too long with the books. His relationship with the poetry section is one of dismay and irritation. The speaker's annoyance results in his speedy exit from the store. The poem reflects on the quiet and irrepressible way in which poetry challenges readers to listen to its concerns. Poetry, like a patient, is easy to dismiss if it fails to meet a person's immediate needs. Without the capacity to adjust expectations and accept each unique encounter with a poem or a patient, a reader or a practitioner will never reap the rewards of experiencing relationship with something beyond themselves. I imagine that, in the same situation, God in Levertov's "Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis" would have stuck around and endured the poetry's challenge, even through his "sickened desire to renege." But the speaker in "The Other Side" needs to escape from the source of his trouble. He acts quickly to deafen himself to "page / after lamenting page" by heading "out to the hustling street, relieved / to be in the action once more, the blaze of noon, / the loud cars, and all that health." He'd rather be on the "safe" side of "Health" where his world is filled with light and noise. The poem testifies to the difficulty of facing darkness, silence, pain and confusion, all of which are amply present in experience.

The last paragraph was written ~~on~~ 11th September, 2001, at the same time as the large-scale terrorist attacks on the World Trade

⁴¹⁸ Steele, *Invisible Riders* (Sydney: Paper Bark P, 1999) 56.

Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C.. This event gives a sharper and more serious edge to my reading of Steele's poem. The street on which the speaker attempts to regain his sense of certainty may not only be unhealthy but also unsafe. The speaker is presented with the choice of listening to the poetry's concerns or of turning his back on the encounter by exiting onto the noisy street. Schweitzer's observation that "[p]ower makes no noise. It is there, and works," is a reminder that listening occurs only in quiet places such as the poetry section of the bookstore where the human heart unravels and speaks.⁴¹⁹ This is, of course, not to say that bookstores are safe and streets are not. Rather, "The Other Side" highlights the danger of dualistic thinking regarding what is controllable, certain and safe. Experience itself, as I have discussed at length, is a risk. To think that safety can be ensured by depending on streets and cars is to kid oneself that humans are in control of the universe. Poetry acknowledges that this is not the case. It is no wonder, then, that the speaker perceives the familiar and solid objects blazing in the sunlight outside the bookstore as symbols of "all that health." The speaker believes that he is getting a handle on the situation but he fails to realize that health is not so much about finding "relief" but in discovering sustainable ways of being. As Levertov discerns, "[a]t the extreme, human value resides in being, not doing."⁴²⁰ She remarks that action "is often the only truthful *expression* of being."⁴²¹ However, she privileges being over acting when she states that "if

⁴¹⁹ Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, 249.

⁴²⁰ Levertov, "A Conversation with Denise Levertov," interview with Jewel Spears Brooker, 1995, Brooker, *Conversations*, 188.

⁴²¹ Levertov, "A Conversation," Brooker, *Conversations*, 188.

you can, do; but if you can't, all is not lost."⁴²² This does not mean that she thinks doing nothing is a good course of action. Far from it. She privileges being over action because in being she perceives an enormous amount of activity that has undeniable repercussions in the world. To separate being and action is to try to prise apart intertwined aspects of the same events: as we have seen, being sustains an enormous amount of activity. Being can be rationalised as a kind of backdrop, like Heidegger's "earth," against which action occurs. However, the experience of being occurs always, like Heidegger's *Erfahrung*, in the context of relationship. Perhaps this is why Schweitzer asserts that "[t]he meaning of human life, therefore, cannot consist in action, but only in coming to an ever clearer understanding of man's relation to the universe."⁴²³ Relationship is the event in which both being and action occur.

Clearly, an event cannot be disassembled the way an object can be. Events that involves humans, whether they be terrorist attacks or making dinner for friends, are events in which each person is accountable not only for their actions but for the unique and singular relationship each has with the world. It is only when this relationship is acknowledged that an understanding of events can be approached. As Gadamer writes, "[t]he 'soul' does not represent just one particular domain among others, but rather reflects the totality of the embodied existence of the human being. This is something which Aristotle knew. The soul is the living power of the body itself."⁴²⁴ Being and acting are described here as part of the same event, that is

⁴²² Levertov, "A Conversation," Brooker, *Conversations*, 188.

⁴²³ Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, 115.

“the embodied existence of the human being.” The experience of embodiment is the event in which limitation and freedom occur as one. As Gadamer puts it, “[t]he soul is the living power of the body itself.” Spiritual and physical life cannot be separated, and for this reason, experience is not a simple matter to define. Bruns points out that experience “cannot be contained within propositions or underwritten by the law of contradiction. It has the universality of proverbs rather than of principles. It is never rule-governed.”⁴²⁵ Poetry, which “has the universality of proverbs,” is a form of listening that acknowledges the interconnections that sustain it.

Levertov’s “The News and a Green Moon. July 1994” contrasts an elderly astronaut’s values with the speaker’s appreciation of life on earth. While the astronaut “thinks too much has been spent on Welfare, all his devotion given to / leaving / uncherished Earth behind,” the speaker is aware of the value of “one particular field or tree,” “the human past” and “sacred mountains and wells or nontechnological orders of knowledge.”⁴²⁶ The astronaut longs for escape and envisages life in another world, and the speaker desires a closer connection with this world and is interested in what she can observe from her earthly perspective. She notices “the haze of green radiance the moon gives off this night, this one / quick / breath of time . . . It is beautiful, a beryl, a disk of soft jade melting / into its own light. So silent.” In this silence she is attuned to the earth’s troubles: “[a]nd earth’s cries of anguish almost audible.” Here listening is more than the capacity to discern “audible” sounds. It is

⁴²⁴ Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health*, 173.

⁴²⁵ Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, 183.

an attentiveness to events that rewards the speaker with a vision of what is "beautiful . . . in its own light." The speaker's world is not a place from which she needs to make a quick exit. The astronaut, like the speaker in Steele's poem, would probably also head for the nearest exit of the bookstore. This speaker, however, would be more inclined to stop and give her attention to the works she encounters. Appreciation of her world is also expressed in the two remaining poems in my discussion, "The Hymn" and "Sands of the Well." Each poem features a well that is a space of poetic and spiritual vision.

The well image in "The Hymn" is a space in which humans can discover the "power / of the inner eye." With this perception the speaker attends to things in all their exquisite detail:

Had I died, or was I
 very old and blind, or
 was the dream —
 this hymn, this ecstatic paean,
 this woven music
 of color and form, of the sense
 of airy space —
 was the dream
 showing forth the power
 of Memory, now, today or at any
 moment of need? Or the power
 of the inner eye, distinct,
 from Memory, Imagination's power,
 greater than we remember,
 in abeyance, the well in which
 we forget to dip our cups?

At all events,
 that broad hillside of trees
 all in leaf, trees of all kinds,
 all hues of green, gold-greens, blue-greens,
 black-greens, pure and essential
 green-greens, and warm and deep

⁴²⁶ Levertov, *SW*, 54. The entire poem is in Appendix V.

maroons, too, and the almost purple
of smoketrees — all perceived
in their mass of rounded, composed forms
across a half mile of breezy air,
yet with each leaf
rippling, gleaming,
visible almost to vein and serration:

at all events, that sight
brought with it, in dream
such gladness, I wept
tears of gratitude
(such as I've never wept, only read
that such tears sometimes
are shed) amazed to know
this power was mine, a thing given,
to see so well, though asleep,
though blind,
though gone from the earth.⁴²⁷

The “well in which / we forget to dip our cups” is the “[i]magination’s power” that is active in the speaker’s “dream” state. The vision is an experience of deep connection with a fresh, colourful, spacious world: “this hymn, this ecstatic paean, / this woven music / of color and form, of the sense / of airy space.” The love with which the speaker describes things invests them with beauty. For example, the group of trees in the second stanza consists of

. . . trees of all kinds,
all hues of green, gold-greens, blue-greens,
black-greens, pure and essential
green-greens, and warm and deep
maroons, too, and the almost purple
of smoketrees — all perceived
in their mass of rounded, composed forms
across a half mile of breezy air,
yet with each leaf
rippling, gleaming,
visible almost to vein and serration.

⁴²⁷ Levertov, *SW*, 97-8.

The leaves' "rippling" is reminiscent of the earth-shattering transformation experienced by the trees in "A Tree Telling or Orpheus." It is conceivable that these trees are the very same trees that Orpheus's music permeated. This time a human being perceives the gift of music. The effect is joyful and astonishing for the speaker: "that sight / brought with it, in dream / such gladness, I wept / tears of gratitude." Her realization that the "power" resided not only in the trees but in herself as well is a discovery that amazes her. Even though she is "asleep," "blind" and "gone from the earth," her vision is real. She is both absent and present in this experience of vision, and similarly the dream trees are both absent and present. It is a joyful shock to realize that her own experience contains such simultaneous strands. However, the fabric of her experience, "this woven music," is actually constituted by these strands. This simultaneity is not an abstraction but a living activity that maintains the deep distance in which the speaker's experience occurs. When she writes of "the well in which / we forget to dip our cups," she indicates her awareness of the possibility of vision in everybody's experience. Her perception, and the joy that it brings, is something she envisages for all human beings. In this way, relationship with the world would be deepened and listening would be a kind of everyday epiphany. Listening, or attentiveness, would be a way of life that would enable love to grow not only in the space of human relationships but also in the vast distance of relationship between humans and the larger world.

While "The Hymn" features an image of a well, "Sands of the Well" is itself a well in which readers can dip their cups. The

speaker wonders whether she is looking at water, air or light since each comes to resemble the others. The poem is a quiet celebration of her capacity to see things outside their usual categories. She perceives, instead, "the mystery" of the world around her:

The golden particles
 descend, descend,
 traverse the water's
 depth and come to rest
 on the level bed
 of the well until,
 the full descent
 accomplished, water's
 absolute transparency
 is complete, unclouded
 by constellations
 of bright sand.
 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?
 With a wand
 of willow I again
 trouble the envisioned pool,
 the cloudy nebulae
 form and disperse,
 the separate
 grains again
 slowly, slowly
 perform their descent,
 and again
 stillness ensues,
 and the mystery
 of that sheer
 clarity, is it water indeed,
 or air, or light?

The bright sand descends and settles, and the speaker perceives the water's transparency. In her essay, "The Poet in the World,"

Levertov recalls a childhood experience of listening to her older, teenage sister propose a theory of the human brain as a series of compartments, labeled according to their correspondence with objects in the world.⁴²⁸ Levertov's disagreement with this kind of theory can be seen in "Sands of the Well" in which matter cannot be categorized as such. Labels fail to capture the activity of the sand and water in the well. The poem occurs as a meditation in which "[t]ransparency" is "seen for itself — / as if its quality / were not, after all, / to enable / perception not of itself." "Transparent" means "[h]aving the property of transmitting light, so as to render bodies lying beyond completely visible; that can be seen through; diaphanous."⁴²⁹ To notice transparency, then, the speaker must notice the objects it makes visible. This is a paradox from which she gains enormous understanding of her relationship with the world around her. I imagine that, in her earlier poetry, such a paradox would have been a source of frustration rather than wonder. Now, however, she is fascinated by the interconnections that occur in her own experience.

She asks "[i]s this / the place where you / are brought in meditation?" and her answer comes in the form of an observation and another question: "stillness ensues, / and the mystery / of that sheer / clarity, is it water indeed, / or air, or light?" The poem's three questions do not require clear-cut answers since the answers are contained within the experience that inspires them. The first line — "[t]he golden particles" — and the final few lines — "and the

⁴²⁸ Levertov, "The Poet in the World," *NSE*, 137.

⁴²⁹ "Transparent," *OED*.

mystery / of that sheer / clarity, is it water indeed, / or air, or light?" — form a kind of frame that contains the poem's concerns. "[G]olden particles" could refer to a number of different materials: specks of mica or dust; tiny fragments of material examined under a microscope; or flecks of gold shining from within a painting. Light is reflected off the particles. This reference to light is mirrored in the last lines, and specifically the last word, with the question, "is it water indeed, / or air, or light?" The poem revolves around this question and, towards the end of the poem, the speaker answers with the words, "the mystery / of that sheer clarity." The word "mystery" appears frequently in Levertov's poetry and, as I highlighted in Chapter One, she asserts that the "acknowledgement, and celebration, of mystery probably constitutes the most consistent theme of my poetry from its very beginnings."⁴³⁰ While things in "Sands of the Well" are seen with absolute clarity, they remain mysterious. The grains of sand are "golden particles," "constellations / of bright sand," and "cloudy nebulae." They could easily be stars or other bodies in space, especially given their slow-motion movements through water: "descend, descend"; "come to rest"; "form and disperse"; "slowly, slowly." "Nebulae" refers to "luminous patches made by clusters of distant stars or by gaseous or stellar matter outside the solar system" and also to "[a] film upon, or covering, the eye; specifically a clouded speck or spot on the cornea causing defective vision."⁴³¹ Like the water in the well, the cornea, which forms part of the anterior covering of the eyeball, is transparent. The

⁴³⁰ Levertov, "A Poet's View," *NSE*, 246.

⁴³¹ "Nebulae," *OED*.

grains' gravity-governed, slow-motion descent to the bottom of the well enables clarity of vision. Levertov celebrates the water's transparency and also takes a closer look at it by highlighting, not only the things it makes visible, but the transparency itself. By definition, "transparent" means "[h]aving the property of transmitting light, so as to make objects lying beyond clearly visible; pellucid; diaphanous."⁴³² Transparency itself, then, can only be recognised by the things it makes visible. That is, it is perceived as an absence. Likewise, in their experience humans witness not experience itself but the relationship experience enables. Looking through water and listening to one's own experience both describe the event of opening or transcendence that, for Levertov, brings about the discovery that action in the world and poetic praxis can arise out of the same relationship. Levertov's belief in the power of words to "change the chemistry of the soul" is embodied equally in her ethics and aesthetics.

This thesis has been sustained by my own fascination with the image of the well, particularly the way it develops through Levertov's career. The transformations in the well, from symbol to transparent image, indicate the ways that inner and outer worlds interact in Levertov's experience. Focussing on Heidegger's distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* helped me to embark on the journey into the concept of experience. I was motivated to combine my interest in the well image with my emerging curiosity regarding experience, and I began to think about the form in which the interaction between language and experience occurs. Levertov's

⁴³² "Transparent," *OED*.

well image appears throughout her entire career and provides an excellent way of reviewing the developments not only in her poetry but in her poetics. That is, the well image provides access to Levertov the writer as well as Levertov the theorist. As it turns out, the writer and the theorist cannot be separated easily and this is the main reason Levertov's work continues to appeal to me. Her prose offers autobiographical insights as well as advancing her thinking on a broad range of topics such as literature, politics and religion. Her poetry, on the other hand, offers these things differently. In poetry, explanation is replaced with forms, made up by structures such as the image of the well, that convey not only the poet's thinking but also the relationships of mood, emotion, shape, tone, sound and silence that occur in the poetry itself. Levertov calls such a vast yet abbreviated set of relationships "total meaning."⁴³³

At first the well appears to be a straightforward symbol that reveals the poet's longing for greater connection with the world. It then occurs as a site in which the activity of desire is experienced by both the poet and the poem itself. The image of the well and the activity of desire are simultaneous, and each indicates the presence of the other. In the later poetry the well occurs as a transparent structure that is less a space of desire than an instance or event of relationship. It is here that Levertov consolidates her commitment to listening. At this stage in her career Levertov is no longer preoccupied with the distance between herself and the world. Rather, she is devoted to poetry in which the activity of listening fosters a transcendence that always, already occurs in experience. While Levertov's poetics

⁴³³ Levertov, "A Conversation," Sutton, Brooker, *Conversations*, 16.

focuses upon the experience of both relationship and transcendence, her poetry is the form in which these events occur. This extended analysis of the image of the well and the concepts of experience, transcendence and relationship demonstrates that Levertov's poetics of listening is both an ethics and an aesthetics.

APPENDICES

Appendix I

FIVE ASPECTS OF FEAR

I

ONLY FEAR

Familiar images of mellow ruin —
 of summer peering from under wistful arches,
 the fall of leaves on leaden lakes —

fade into shadows, as the rainy larches
 fade into a mist beneath the hill,
 their pensive grace inadequate.

Happy to feel, at last, the hand fulfil
 its promise of reality; to penetrate
 the woollen forest and discover

an earthy path and unembroidered gate,
 a credible living world of danger and joy,
 regret grows obsolete, remote.

And only fear has power to destroy
 the new immediacy of pain or pride
 and steal your sleeping love;

words must be flesh and blood, not ghosts, to ride
 over unbearable deserts of fear, and reach
 the tangible city and desired embrace.

II

FEAR THE FOOL

Fear in haste, like horses over heath
 galloping black and shiny in the night,
 spreads wings across the waste of calendars,
 rags fluttering, fingers trembling, grabs at the hours
 but finds them gone and laughing further on;
 or hears, beguiled, the weeping of desire,
 and with a candle discovers the face of love.

But love is too serious to be long a slave:
 Fear wakes to find the sparkling wave a brackish
 and sombre shade in his glass. 'O return,'
 he cries, 'caprice fairer than constancy!
 What sail, what feather charmed you?
 Summer shade, what sun do you follow,
 and where is the westward sinking of my heart?'

Then Fear upbraids his dreams, 'These nymphs
 were never mine, you lied!' And while the long
 sonata hastens toward silence, he spins
 round corners of blanched and secret streets, his whip
 beating the dead air of night, and quickens
 the beat of his drum, seeking the music of life.

III

OMINOUS MORNING

Of ominous morning and the flight of stars
 hunter and hawker and crimson fox
 burning doors with intractable locks,
 fear (like a weapon in darkness) mutters.

Stepping on comets I flew to the sea,
 daylight revealed the wreck, the weed,
 and no one to vanquish or impede
 ominous morning and the flight of stars.

IV

DREAMS

Comfort me: I wake from dreams of death,
 I have seen the light of leaves grow red, the star
 open its heart and mock me with decay,
 my love a harlot in the halls of death.

Comfort me: I come with no desire;
 the shadowed fire of rain in hollow streets,
 the idle laughter and the glittering glass,
 are images of fear and not desire.

Waken me: I fear to find you lost;
 my dreams of music ended silently,
 the sullen opening of heavy doors
 revealed the ravaged landscape of the lost.

V

THE PAST CAN WAIT

In fear of floods long quenched, waves fallen,
 shattered mirrors darken with old cries;
 where no shot sounds the frightened birds go flying
 over heights of autumn soft as honey:
 each country left is full of our own ghosts
 in fear of floods quenched, waves fallen.
 Rags of childhood flutter in the woods
 and each deserted post has sentinels;
 bright eyes in wells watch for the sun's assassin:
 the regions bereft of our desires are haunted,
 rags of childhood flutter in the woods.
 Now when the night is blind with stars
 now when candles dazzle the day
 now
 turn from phantoms: they are preoccupied
 with a solved conundrum and an old pursuit.
 O, be deaf to what they say —
 rumours of distant winters and a broken bough —
 now when your love is a candle to dazzle the day.⁴³⁴

⁴³⁴ Levertoff, *DI*, 17-21.

Appendix II

MEDITATION AND VOICES

The mortal failure is the perfect mask,
 the adamant and long desired defense.
 Assiduously, like soft approaching nightmare,
 we amplify the sinister pretence,

ignore the fable which we dare not fear,
 turn a deaf ear to death, cover our tracks.
 But you and I lack skill in prison building;
 anger and love still enter by the cracks.

'Hard crust and bitter sky
 I pit against your words;
 clatter of clogs on stone,
 the frozen falling birds.'

'And I will never confess
 my hunger and my guilt:
 A smile about my lips,
 my hand on the sword's hilt.'

The mortal failure is to turn away,
 to lock the gates and throw away the key,
 poison the well with droppings of deceit
 and fossilize in false solemnity.

'The blue-veined mountains, the sterile sun,
 hang above me as I run;
 but the hand that could point out the way
 plucks at the sheet, shrivels away.

I cross the dry contemptuous sands
 and hear all night the shouting sea;
 if I should cross to other lands
 contemptuous waves will follow me.'

'The idle rain, and darkness at the door . . .
 "There's room for questions here, Propinquo."
 Do you hear the sullen wind along the floor?
 Or feel the heavy foliage bending closer?'

'I hear the wind, and hear the unborn child's
 heart like a drum; I feel the sullen hour;
 yes, and I know the questions you will ask
 and I would answer, but I lack the power.'

There's some paralysis of heart and hand
 that checks the little word, the easy gesture;
 and only they could make you understand
 the incalculable, still, unhappy silence.

A mask's protection—ah, and there's the treason—
 can make the hidden face its own dark image;
 whip off that covering, no doubt you'll find
 only the bright indifferent gaze of reason.

I found the shells of peace, the starry shore,
 and heard the curlews crying as they flew,
 mooring at sundown in a western haven:
 but not with you, my love, nor yet with you.

These are my valid symbols, but to you
 I know they are the distance and a veil.
 How to transpose them to your naïve key,
 or make them nearer than a fairy tale?

Green waves of passionate seas assail the caves
 not more importantly than I dream; I take
 a thousand dreams like stars in eager arms,
 and, light as dust, they vanish when I wake;

and still the secrets dwell in other glances,
 lost as a quiet well in summer woods,
 when the brown hill is arid in its pride
 and all day long the glittering heat advances.

'But where are we getting to?' my shadow said,
 'The mortal failure is your vanity;
 you watch in mirrors for your own dark head.
 It flatters you to dream in discontent
 of how the world is alien and unreal,
 or what the phantoms of your childhood meant.

The cruel almost hastens to be new
 each frivolous and unemotional spring.
 Why must you hoard your sorrows, count your sins,
 and hope to rub a genie from your ring?

Leave your dark autumn groves, the roads oppressed
 by dropping alder and repining cloud—
 lack-lustre follies, harvests of reproach.
 Follow your sunrise shadow to the west!

Each voice that comes to trouble you is your own:
the hard, the hungry, lost or questioning.
To find what land your lover travels, turn
out to the waiting sea. You are alone.⁴³⁵

⁴³⁵ Levertoff, *DI*, 28-30.

Appendix IV

THE WORD

Wonder or dream from distant land
I carried to my country's strand

And waited till the twilit morn
Had found the name within her bourn —

Then I could grasp it close and strong
It blooms and shines now the front along . . .

Once I returned from happy sail,
I had a prize so rich and frail,

She sought for long and tidings told:
"No like of this these depths enfold."

And straight it vanished from my hand,
The treasure never graced my land . . .

So I renounced and sadly see:
Where word breaks off no thing may be.⁴³⁷

Stefan Georg

⁴³⁷ This poem appears in Martin Heidegger's *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (San Francisco: Harper, 1971) 140. It is reprinted in Gerald Bruns, *Heidegger's Estrangements: Language, Truth, and Poetry in the Later Writings* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989) 102. While Herz uses the word "enfold," Bruns uses "unfold." I have decided to reproduce Herz's version.

Appendix V

THE NEWS AND A GREEN MOON. JULY 1994.

The green moon, almost full.
 Huge telescopes are trained on catastrophe:
 comet fragments crash into Jupiter, gouging
 craters gleeful astronomers say are bigger than Earth
 (or profound displacements, others claim — tunnels, if you will —
 in that planet's gaseous insubstantiality).

Visualize that. Visualize the News. The radio
 has an hour to deliver so much. Cooperate.
 Two thirds of what's left of Rwanda's people after the massacres
 milling about in foodless, waterless camps.
 Or not milling about, because they're dying

or dead. The green moon, or maybe
 when it rises tomorrow in Rwanda or Zaire it will look
 white, yellow, serenely silver. Here in the steamy gray
 of heatwave dusk it's green as lime. Twenty five years ago
 absurd figures, Michelin tire logos, bounced on the moon, whitely.

An audio report from Haiti: Voodoo believers
 scrub themselves frantically under a waterfall,
 wailing and shouting — you can hear the water behind them.
 A purification ritual. Not a response to astronomical events
 but to misery. Names change, the Tonton Macoute not mentioned

of late, but misery's tentacles don't relax. Babies now
 (as the mike moves on), more wailing, no shouting, a hospital,
 mothers and nuns sing hymns, there's not much food to give out.
 Young men's bodies, hands tied behind them, litter the streets
 of Port au Prince. (As rivers and lakes

in Africa have been littered recently, and not long ago in Salvador —
 a familiar item of News.) The crowded boats (again) set out,
 sink or are turned back. There could be, a scientist says
 (the program returns to Jupiter) an untracked comet any time
 heading for Earth. No way to stop it. Meanwhile

an aging astronaut says he regrets we're not sending men to Mars,
 that would be progress, he thinks, a mild-mannered man, he thinks
 too much has been spent on Welfare, all his devotion given to
 leaving
 uncherished Earth behind, none to some one particular field or tree
 and whatever knows it as home, none to the human past either,

certainly none to sacred mountains and wells or nontechnological
orders of knowledge. And meanwhile I'm reading Leonardo
Sciascia's
furious refinements of ironic analysis, mirrored pathways
of the world's corruption in Sicily's microcosm. I feel the weight
of moral torpor; the old buoyant will for change that found me
actions

to reflect itself (as the moon finds mirrors in seas and puddles)
butts its head on surfaces that give back no image. Slowly, one speck
to a square meter, cometary dust, continually as if from an
inexhaustible
talcum shaker, falls unseen, adding century by century its increment
to Earth's burden. Covered in that unseen dust I'm peering up to
see

the haze of green radiance the moon gives off this night, this one
quick
breath of time. No lunamancy tells me its significance, if it has one.
It is beautiful, a beryl, a disk of soft jade melting
into its own light. So silent.
And earth's cries of anguish almost audible.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁸ Levertov, *SW*, 54-5.

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