

PROJECTIONS OF DENISE LEVERTOV'S LITERARY ALTER EGO

ABSTRACT

Denise Levertov (1923-1997) was variably associated with a wide array of influences which she reabsorbed and adopted to her voice to constitute an index of her intellectual curiosity. Levertov always felt her marginal position in the United States. Consequently, this made her move freely in various directions without compromising her own convictions. Against a male-dominated current she tried to reassert her voice that came of age after World War II. The image of the old woman is a redefinition of her identity through which she undoubtedly showed that women can reconstruct their identities.

She consciously explores the split aspects of her ego to resist the mental fragmentation which artistic creative minds could suffer under the pressures of a dominant culture. She protected herself against self-division as she withstood these pressures. Her projection of the alter ego is part of her personal quest for Wholeness. Moreover, the different projections she renders yield meaning to transform the human conscience. They radiate social, moral, psychological and political realms. She promotes change through her active imagination as she evokes the individual to be an advocate of change. In the redefinition of her identity she acts as a catalyst for a new culture.

Key words: Old woman, male, culture, change, poets, activist, identity

1.1 Introduction

Denise Levertov (1923-1997) was born in Essex of a Russian father and a Welsh mother. She came to the United States as the wife of Mitchel Goodman(1923-1997), an American writer whom she met in France.¹ She was variably associated with a wide array of influences: the Transcendentalists, the Beats, the Objectivists and the Black Mountain which she reabsorbed and adopted to her voice to constitute an index of her intellectual curiosity.²

Due to her being an alien in the United States, she always felt her marginal position. Consequently, this made her move freely in various directions without compromising her own poetic and personal convictions. She stated, "I had, certainly, the great advantage of not being connected to any 'literary world' in particular."³

Against a male-dominated current Levertov tried to reassert her voice. She wrote to William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), "the poet's obligation is to his voice- to find it and use it."⁴ Her voice that came of age after World War II, not simply a voice of a woman poet, but "a voice and perspective for women"⁵ and for people in general. Upon being asked by Nancy K. Gish Levertov observed, "As a poet I'm a poet. I'm not a woman poet, not a man poet. I'm a poet."⁶

Though her poetry was against the political and social chaos, but still she was convinced that a poet should communicate with the earthly suffering through art as a balanced source of inspiration. She confessed, "I do not think that a violent imitation of our times is the concern of our poetry ...I long for poems of an Inner harmony in utter contrast with the chaos in which they exist."⁷ Against the pressures of the second half of the twentieth century world and with powerful image – making she openly celebrated her identity and undoubtedly showed that women can reconstruct their identities.

Levertov intuitively realized the implicit danger of self-fragmentation, saying "When we split ourselves up into opposing factions, fragments-intellectual and emotions, body and Spirit, private and public, we destroy ourselves."⁸ She protected herself against self-division as she "withstood without yielding" the pressures of life. In a letter to Levertov, William Carlos Williams praised her, saying "what would torn a woman apart otherwise. The tensions as she withstood without yielding"⁹.

1.2 The Image of the Old woman

The self-split theme is revealed in the image of the old woman, a recurrent image in Levertov's poems on identity. The archetype of the old woman is transformed into a prototype, a dynamic model of representation.¹⁰ Apparently the poet was wisely conscious that the old woman as an archetype is inadequate to represent the woman as life-giving, inspiring figure determined by her nurturing capacity.

"The Earth woman and the Water woman" in *Here and Now* (1957) marks Levertov's starting point of saga images of self-definition. The two women represent the opposite roles of Levertov: The mother and the poet.

The earth mother is like an "oak tree" firmly rooted to the soil to indicate the ancient solid ground to which she belongs. She is the motherly woman who acts this role for long as the oak which lives for long time. Socially she is the embodiment of the conventional woman in the fifties, the Victorian angel in the house: the devoted housewife and mother who is as Adrienne Rich recalls "making careers of domestic

perfection... retiring to raise large familiesthe family in its glory. Life was extremely private; women were isolated from each other by the loyalties of marriage."¹¹ Levertov describes her as "The earth woman by her oven/trends her cakes of good grain/...has oak tree arms" (1-6)¹². She is well adjusted to the role of a mother who takes good care of her children "her children/full of blood and milk/stamp through the woods shouting"(6-8).She is contend with her warm and comfortable life,

when the earth woman
has had her fill of the good day
she curls to sleep in her warm hut
a dark furniture sleep
(12-15)

On the other hand, the water woman is not the domestic nourishing mother because her children are "spindle and thin; she is the imaginative nurturing mother whose children are fed with moonbeams.

She is the illuminating resource for her children. The difference between the children of the two women is exactly as the difference between the tangible and the nontangible: the " children full of blood and milk" and the "moonshine children."

After a long day she cannot curl to sleep as her counterpart, she sings and dances outside her house. She is potentially creative, lavishly dressed as a dragonfly and sings in a sad voice. The poet observes

The water woman
Sings gay songs in a sad voice
With her moonshine children.

.....
Goes dancing in the misty lit –up town
In dragonfly dresses and blue shoes.

(9-18)

Her qualities are nonexistent in the earth woman. She can move freely in all directions like the dragonfly unlike the earth woman who is enclosed in her house .Unluckily the water woman 's voice is sad though she is free: this has its social dimension that reflects the inner conflict in Levertov the poet and the mother. As a

poet living in the fifties such conflict causes her psychological imbalance: an act of disloyalty to her serious responsibilities as a mother.

The poet herself recognizes the nature of split-self, stating "Poets owe to poetry itself a loyalty which may at times be in conflict with the demands of domestic or other aspects of life. Out of those conflicts, sometimes, poetry itself reemerges."¹³ The earth woman and the water woman are two different manifestations of Levertov's self. They are so neatly differentiated as Sandra Gilbert puts it, "both are exuberant, both celebrate the authentic in its different manifestations"¹⁴The earth woman and the water woman have to be reconciled to represent one. Naturally earth needs water to extend life because it is the resource of life. Hence it is essential that the earth woman needs the water woman to complete her character as Levertov needs the poet and the mother to form her integrated human figure. This view opposes other critical ones which sustain the mental fragmentation in Levertov's mind, as Deborah Pope who sees the split-self unhealed exposes an outlook far from the symbolic meaning of the poem. Pope states that "Levertov still dances herself from the split by projecting it onto these ...forms and by using two women rather than a single woman divided against herself"¹⁵,

However, Levertov's "dragonfly dresses" is her other facet which is repeated in another poem titled "The dragonfly-Mother" from *Candles in Babylon* (1982). In this case Levertov extends the argument to be between her two identities: the poet and the activist. Indifferent to Levertov's social commitments, the dragonfly mother defers her from leaving home to give a speech at an anti war rally. She describes it as follows:

I was setting out from my house
To keep my promise
But the Dragonfly-Mother stopped me
I was to speak to a multitude
For a good cause

(1-5)¹⁶

Levertov's social commitment in the war resistance movements in the sixties, the seventies and well in the eighties was part of what she thought the poet's responsibilities to intuitively resist the oppression Of male-domination of her time.

As she and the dragonfly mother were engaged in talking, she immediately recovered the image of the water woman who is dressed as a dragonfly with blue shoes. They are the same

Three hours, and a rose
 And wrote. I remember the old
 Water woman, in dragonfly dresses
 And blue shoes, long ago.
 She is the same.
 Whose children were thin
 Left at home when she went out
 She is the Dragonfly-Mother dancing.

(28-35)

The dragonfly – mother acts as a catalyst for expanding her imagination, as did the water woman. She moves freely. The dragonfly's agile flight in all directions "darts unforeseeably/ into unexpected directions" exude a sense of powerful poise, an indication of elegance and maturity.¹⁷

Who is the dragonfly-mother?
 What does she do?
 She is the one who hovers
 On stairway of air,

 She is the one who darts unforeseeably
 Into unexpected dimensions

(10-17)

It is an indication of Levertov's deeper perspective of herself. She "darts blue zigzag" which is reflected in water makes her laugh as she sees her image reflected in water," Who sees in water/her own blue fire zigzag, and lifts/herself in laughter"(18-20) Levertov identifies herself with the dragonfly-mother as she is fully conscious that she represents her split self .The image of water is an act of going beyond the surface. Metaphorically it is the change which the dragonfly mother stands for. As the multifaceted eyes of the dragonfly give her sight beyond limitation of life,¹⁸ so is Levertov 's dragonfly mother enriches her with inspiring profundity.

Furthermore, this identification marks her ability to unmask her real self. She recalls her old self which she sees present in the dragonfly mother. The colours blue and gold remind one of the Iridescence of the dragonfly: the blue is replaced by gold and the suffering is replaced by a new vision of the self.

I too
 A creature, grow a among reeds,
 In mud, in air,
 In sunlight cold, in fever
 Of blue-gold zenith, winds
 Of passage.

(58-63)

The juxtaposed image to the happy laughter is the "tearful pale sky" which indicates the poet's surroundings at the time, the political and the social disturbance; hence the sky is "blurred", covered with clouds, indicating her shadowy vision as she is torn between her social commitment as a social tryst and her role as a poet. The "clouds" sail in the "streams"; they are moving and a new vision takes over, "into the tearful pale sky/that sails blurred clouds in the stream"(21-22).

To expand the impact of the old woman, Levertov utilizes the image as an internal resource to describe her potential power. In "the Soothsayer" from *Candles in Babylon*. She marks the voice of experience, a forewarning for young literary talents of the difficulty of the creative process.

She is "the weaver of fiction", working at the loom of fiction, carefully pulls "a single thread/every day" and returns to spin it during the night. She industriously and patiently revises what she writes "to get it right". As an expert she addresses young writers, saying:

My daughters, the old woman says, the weaver
 Of fictions, tapestries
 From which she pulls pursuing
 Only a single thread every day,
 The theme at night-

(1-5)

The longtime of experience made the old woman as a vigorous "tree "rooted to the soil, a living one continually blossoms. Her inexperienced daughters are "fragile", artificially shinning; they will remain lifeless as "stone" though "polished". Furthermore, she outwardly seems "dry and crisp as moss," but

inwardly she is full of life. The image of the "moss" projects an essential facet of Levertov's ego. Naturally, the "moss" has no proper roots;¹⁹ It symbolizes stillness, hence the old woman describes herself as "dry", but the moss has drought tolerance²⁰ which is metaphorically applied to the poet herself in her willingness to accept and endure difficulties. The poet writes:

My daughters? Delicate bloom
 Of polished stone. Their hair
 Ripples and shines like water, and mine
 Is dry and crisp as moss on fall
 Trunk, limbs, bank; roots under all of it:
 The tree I am, she says, blossoms year after year

(6-11)

Levertov surmounted obstacles to consolidate her position as a poet. Hence the tolerance and patience which the old woman renders are active internal powers that the poet sustains to survive as a woman writer. Due to this she warns her "daughters" that the responsibility is heavy and requires serious dedication to be accomplished

My daughters
 Have yet to bear
 Their fruit,
 They have not imagined
 The weight of it.

(15-19)

In a detailed manner Levertov exposes her devotion to learn the skills of poetry in "the Great Black Heron" in *Sands of the Well* (1996) where the old woman fishes on the river bank at all times,

Since I stroll in the woods more often
 Than on the this frequented path, it's usually
 Trees I observe; but among fellow humans
 What I like best is to see an old woman
 Fishing alone at the end of a jetty,
 Hours on end, plainly content.²¹

(1-6)

She endures all uncongenial times, especially the reference to Viet Nam war which Levertov remembers as she remembers the lake in Hanoi

Vietnamese families
 Fishing or simply sitting as close as they can
 To the water, make me recall that lake in Hanoi
 In the amber light, our first, jet-lagged enemy,
 Peace in the war we had come to witness.

(11-15)

Moreover, the old woman who embodies Levertov's voice of experience is linked with the enduring spirit of the black woman in cotton fields as a slave, "growing it Self among the rows of cotton/in red-earth country, under/the feet of mules and masters, I see her" (18-20). Through the image of the black woman Levertov intends to make her readers remember her personal image as a poet who endures all pressures and gets only "scanty trophies"

Learning her skill with the pole, what battles
 Has she survived, what labors?
 She's gathered up all the time in the world
 -nothing else- and waits for scanty trophies

(22-25)

The image gives a broader perspective to the role of the poet. She deserves to be a symbol of "an entire culture"(17)

However, in her attempt to redefine herself, the poet abbreviates the growth of her experience to be "complete in herself as a heron." The image of the heron, the African bird, is extremely significant to summarize the message of the poem which is patience. Naturally the heron is distinguished by its unique method in hunting; it is called the "canopy feeding"; The bird extends its wings like an umbrella to attract the fish and to make a shade for itself to see the fish.²² All it takes to hunt is waiting. Levertov is like the black heron in her strong insight to watch, evaluate and feel the surroundings patiently.

In addition, the heron is also linked with precision as it is myth- logically symbolizes the "holy spear", a messenger from the gods; like an arrow hits people to make sure they are on target.²³This could

figuratively refer to Levertov herself as a spear of communication with the world, waiting for reply from people whom she emotionally responds to their fears. This is owing to her belief that poetry is a spiritual commitment. In an interview she states: "I can't stop writing poetry. I don't write everyday but it is something that my inner being needs to go on doing, and if I haven't written any poems for months,... I don't feel right. I feel uncomfortable."²⁴

Conclusion

In conclusion, with the different images of the old woman Levertov asserts her devoted voice as a poet to maintain an independent place in the literary scene. With her multicultural heritage and at the expense of external pressures surrounding her, she kept her personal voice in a male-dominated world of the second half of the twentieth century.

The pervasive image of the old woman is Levertov's redefinition of her identity. Frequently the image recedes further and changes only to show the varied masks worn by the same figure. It appears to be an apt image of the earth woman, the water woman, the dragonfly-mother, the soother, and the black heron. Series of self-representational images are interrelated and they interact in a coherent way to assure profound dimensions that turn them to be recognized as icons originally associated to her. Levertov consciously explores the split aspects of her ego to resist the mental fragmentation which artistic creative minds could suffer under the pressure of a dominant culture. Following Jung in his study of the development of the individual self out of the unconscious, Levertov's projection of the alter ego is part of her personal quest for Wholeness: as the innate elements of her psyche integrate over time to be a whole.

Moreover, the different projections she renders yield meaning to transform the human conscience. They radiate social, moral, psychological and political realms. She promotes change through her active imagination. She specifically evokes the individual as an advocate of change. In the redefinition of her identity Levertov acts as a catalyst for a new culture, an expert voice motivates her literary "daughters" to see new spaces in their creative process. Her priority to human feeling distinguishes her from the poetic fashion of her time. She is actually a unique spear of communication as a heron.

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NOTES

¹Stephen Stepanchev, "projective verse" in *American poetry since 1945*(New York: Harper &Row, Publishers),160.

² See Hyatt Waggoner, *American Poets: From the Puritans to the present* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin,1984),91-92 and Roberta Berke, *Bounds Out of Bounds: A compass for Recent American Poetry*(New York: Oxford University Press, 1981 , 25.

³Denise Levertov, *New & Selected essays* (New York: New Directions,1992),205.

⁴Levertov,*The Letters of Denise Levertov and William Carlos Williams*, ed. Christopher McGowan(New York: New directions,1998),100.

⁵Nancy K. Gish, "Denise Levertov", *Bloom and Docherty*, (1995): 253.

⁶Denise levertov, *Conversations with Denise Levertov*,ed.,Jewell spears Directions,1973),3.

⁷Levertov,*The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions,1973),3.

⁸ Levertov."On 'the Malice of Innocence': Poetry in the Classroom", *American Poetry Review* 1,(1972):44.

⁹Levertov, *The Letters of Denise Levertov with William Carlos Williams*,10.

¹⁰See Rachel Blan DuPlessis, and Peter Quarte Main, eds.,*The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in cultural poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama press,1999),220.

¹¹Adrienne Rich, *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: Norton ,1993),173.

¹²All line references to "*The Earth woman and the Water woman*" are taken from *Collected Earlier Poems 1940-1960* (New York: New Directions, 1979).

¹³ Levertov, *New and Selected Essays*, 263.

¹⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert "Revolutionary Love: Denise Levertov and the Poetics of Politics" 208 in Albert Gelpi, ed., *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 201-217.

¹⁵ Debora Pope "Homespun and Crazy Feathers: The Split-Self in the Poems of Denise Levertov" in Linda Wagner – Martin, *Critical Essays on Denise Levertov* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990), 81. For more on the self-split see "the mind" and "the two voices" for the role opposition.

¹⁶ All line references to the "dragonfly-Mother" and the "Soothsayer" are taken from *Candles in Babylon* (New York: New Directions, 1982).

¹⁷ "Symbolism/meaning of a dragon", <http://www.dragonfly-site.com.>meaning-symbolism>, accessed 4 Oct. 2016.

¹⁸ "Symbolism/meaning of a dragon" almost 80% of the insect's brain power is dedicated to its sight and can see 360 degrees around her.

¹⁹ John Hammerton, ed., *The New Book of Knowledge*, Vol. 6 (London: The Weverby Book Company LTD), 2814-2816).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ All line references to the poem are taken from *Sands of the Well* (New York: New Directions, 1996).

²² "Black Heron", <http://en.m.wikipedia.org>black heron>, accessed 2 Nov. 2016.

²³ "Heron – holy spear", <http://www.wildspeak.com.>animalenergies>, accessed 2 Nov. 2016.

²⁴ Ed Block, "*Spirit in the Poetry of Denise Levertov*", <http://www.thefreelibrary.com>, accessed 26 Dec. 2016. For more of the old woman see "Dream Instruction" in *evening train* (1993) and "looking, walking, being" included in *sands of the well* (1996) to contemplate and not to rush into telling and "to live in what happens, not in the telling"

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