

Concelebration: The Poetic, Personal, and Political in “Human Being” by Denise Levertov

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Denise Levertov gathered the poems in The Stream and the Sapphire: Selected Poems on Religious Themes from seven different volumes that, she says in the foreword, “trace my own slow movement from agnosticism to Christian faith, a movement incorporating much of doubt and questioning as well as of affirmation.” Religious themes recur throughout her poetry and in 1989 she became a Roman Catholic. The title of the first poem in The Stream and the Sapphire, “Human Being,” and the position Levertov has given this poem, tell us that for her, being religious is a process of discovery during the experiences of the day-to-day. Through her imagery Levertov grounds her poems in these experiences of the daily—a heightened perception of the quotidian, to be sure (one reason we need poetry), but a reality any reader can relate to and call his or her own. In this essay I will discuss “Human Being” as an introduction to and encouragement to read The Stream and the Sapphire. The poems are as new now as when they were published some thirty years ago.

But peace, like a poem,
is not there ahead of itself,
can't be imagined before it is made,
can't be known except
in the words of its making,
grammar of justice,
syntax of mutual aid.
—Denise Levertov, “Making Peace”¹

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¹ Denise Levertov, “Making Peace,” in *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov*, introduced by Eavan Boland (New York: New Directions, 2013), 757–758.

Introduction

Denise Levertov (1923–1997) gathered the poems in *The Stream and the Sapphire: Selected Poems on Religious Themes* (1997) from seven different volumes that, she says in the foreword, “trace my own slow movement from agnosticism to Christian faith, a movement incorporating much of doubt and questioning as well as of affirmation.”² She calls this “enterprise” “do-it-yourself theology”; this undertaking, she modestly vows, risks “presumption.” But if it does, every thinking, feeling Christian is presumptuous. All God-talk is forgivable overreach. But then again, perhaps *all discourse* about the sacred, even the most abstruse, academic dissertations, is poetry, courageous pilgrim attempts to approximate truth, or at least truths.

In a recent essay on the poetry of C. P. Cavafy, Orhan Pamuk notes that “great poets can tell their own stories without once saying ‘I,’ and in doing so, lend their voices to all of humanity.”³ In this reflection, I will discuss the first poem in Levertov’s distillation of her written religious journeying, *The Stream and the Sapphire*: “Human Being.” In this poem Levertov does not use the first-person singular, the ubiquitous modern poetic “I,” yet the poem places her—and, importantly, us—in the midst of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with their existential anguish, doubt, and wars and rumors of wars. Here I wish to show how Levertov’s unnamed *dramatis persona* coalesces with some of my own experiences. In the process, I hope to show both how poetry like Levertov’s remains vital and revelatory and how the sacred and the “secular,” the religious and the political, intersect far more than many commonly suppose; in fact, they are coterminous, if not conjoined. For Christians, I believe, this symbiosis can remind us of the indispensability, even sacramentality, of context: excising Jesus from his socio-political situation (foreign occupation, war, oppression by the elite) and then trying to understand him is as foolish as trying to comprehend Gandhi without British imperialism, Mandela without apartheid, or King without segregation and Jim Crow.⁴

² Denise Levertov, *The Stream and the Sapphire: Selected Poems on Religious Themes* (New York: New Directions, 1997), vii.

³ Orhan Pamuk, “Other Countries, Other Shores,” *New York Times Book Review*, December 19, 2013.

⁴ As many have demonstrated, such as: Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York: Continuum, 1984, 1998); Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress,

For Levertov, being religious is both existential and ontological. But if that seems distressingly polysyllabic and off-putting, her poems are anything but: Levertov through her imagery grounds them in experiences of the daily, a heightened perception of the quotidian, to be sure (one reason we need poetry), but a reality any reader can relate to and call his or her own. In this essay I will discuss “Human Being” as an introduction to and encouragement to read *The Stream and the Sapphire*. The poems are as new as when they were published some thirty or more years ago.⁵

Working with Levertov’s spacing on the page, I see “Human Being” as having four parts. Therefore, both to reflect this understanding and to help the reader who does not have the poem at hand, I will divide the paper into four sections, quoting as we go the whole poem.

I. *Kinetic Uncertainty and Invitation*

Human being—walking
 in doubt from childhood on: walking
 a ledge of slippery stone in the world’s woods
 deep-layered with wet leaves—rich or sad: on one
 side of the path, ecstasy, on the other
 dull grief. Walking
 the mind’s imperial cities, roofed-over alleys,
 thoroughfares, wide boulevards
 that hold evening primrose of sky in steady calipers.

“Human Being” opens with the doubt and questioning that Levertov speaks of in the book’s foreword. But the subject of the poem, the human being—as are we—is not locked into doubt, chained and immured: the human being is “walking / in doubt from childhood on”—but, Levertov insists, *is walking*.⁶ This kinetic uncertainty makes the human being of the poem a travelling companion with the twentieth-century monk, writer, and social activist Thomas Merton and, I would suggest, with many modern people of faith: “My Lord

1987, 1993); and John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1972, 1994).

⁵ “Human Being” was published in book form in *Life in the Forest* (New York: New Directions, 1978); in *The Collected Poems*, the poem is on pp. 511–512. In this essay I quote from the text in *The Stream and the Sapphire*, pp. 3–4.

⁶ Levertov, in concert with the poem’s title, does not give the person a gender, so I have avoided gendered pronouns.

God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.”⁷ Levertov walks Merton’s road, but early on in her poetry shows that the path is also her own; “September 1961” sounds metaphors and themes (“walking,” “wonder,” “far to go”) that recur seventeen years later in “Human Being”:

But for us the road
unfurls itself, we count the
words in our pockets, we wonder

how it will be without them, we don’t
stop walking, we know
there is far to go⁸

In “Human Being,” the repetition of the participle “walking” at the end of the first two lines tells us that we *are* going somewhere, even if the “where” is in doubt. With the use of the first-person pronoun, Merton speaks for himself, although the durability of his writings has shown that he is speaking for many modern people. Levertov chooses not to restrict herself to the first-person singular here; that could isolate the experience in the abattoir of American individualism, reduce what’s going on to somnolent habituation, even eccentricity. Instead, by using “human being” as the subject, the poet—as do we—becomes Everyperson, a person who inhabits the modern Western world, both world and individual self-conflicted with modernity’s “impressive achievements and important limitations.”⁹ Yet—walking.

Modernity, as Marcus Borg and numerous others have pointed out, “has made us skeptical about spiritual reality,” and its valorization of what is (seemingly) material, (seemingly) quantifiable, and (seemingly) verifiable has made us “fact fundamentalists,” a faith every bit as pinched and sequestered as religious fundamentalism.¹⁰ This is

⁷ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1956, 1999), 103.

⁸ Levertov, “September 1961,” in *The Collected Poems*, 188.

⁹ Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 15.

¹⁰ Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, 15–16, citing Huston Smith, “Jesus and the World’s Religions” in *Jesus at 2000*, ed. Marcus Borg (Boulder, Colo.:

precisely why, more than ever, we need our poets, our walking theologians who, like many if not most of us, religious or not, walk “a ledge of slippery stone in the world’s woods / deep-layered with wet leaves—rich or sad: on one / side of the path, ecstasy, on the other / dull grief.” The pairings—rich and sad, ecstasy and dull grief—highlight our bifurcations. In addition, we know all too well, if we’re honest, that the poet has only *begun* a list of our contradictions, our dualities, our dualisms. She has in effect given us a fill-in-the-blank, as she will with the final word of each part of the poem. This structure, like the poem’s non-conclusive (yet conclusive) ending, opens the poem, and us, to possibility. Thus the poem works as liturgy, rich with offerings rather than exactments, penultimate rather than ultimate. At the (seeming) end of the eucharist, a minister proclaims with an imperative: “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” Or is he or she *asking* that we do so?² After all, God does not make us be at peace, nor force us to love or serve. The Mass is *not* ended; it continues outside. Our agency is the poem’s, the poem’s ours. All is invitation.¹¹

Such openness—open-endedness, open-handedness—makes the poem, even from the beginning, in spite of its concerns, *because of* its concerns, a benediction. Levertov now repeats, for the third time in six lines, separated with space and capitalized, “Walking.” But here again walking cannot be unambiguous: “Walking / the mind’s imperial cities, roofed-over alleys, / thoroughfares, wide boulevards / that hold evening primrose of sky in steady calipers.” The word “Walking” at the end of the line bequeaths openness. Ambiguity and openness coinhere; one is bread to the other’s wine: together, they point toward mystery. *Mysterion* is the Greek word for “sacrament.”¹² We moderns walk “the mind’s imperial cities, roofed-over alleys, / thoroughfares, wide boulevards.”

Again the dualities: thoroughfares and wide boulevards are conflicted following “imperial cities” and alleys that are roofed-over, shutting out sun and sky. “Imperial” has both biblical and modern resonances. In the Magnificat or Song of Mary (Luke 1:46–55), when

Westview, 1997), 116–117. Borg appropriately refers also to Smith’s critique of “scientism” in *Forgotten Truth* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), and I would add Smith’s *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind* (Wheaton, Ill.: Quest Books, 1989).

¹¹ “All is invitation”: I owe this insight to Debby Spaine.

¹² See G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 892F, “sacrament.”

Mary declares that the Lord “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, / and lifted up the lowly,” we need to remember who sat on the throne in Mary and Jesus’ day. *Caesar, Divi Filius, Imperator, Divus Augustus*: Caesar, Son of God, All-Conquering One, the God Augustus. Such titles were foolishness to the Jews and stumbling blocks to the first Christians. Thus, Mary’s lowly song is an attack on Roman imperial theology that deified the emperor and made the empire sacred. For Christians today what Mary says should be a challenge to any imperial theology, including America’s (the invasion of Iraq in 2003).¹³ “Imperial” thus signals the wars and rumors of wars that lie ahead.

Nevertheless, nevertheless (the adverb of both hope and promise) . . . despite the occlusion of an imperial city, these spacious avenues “hold evening primrose of sky. . . .” The preceding ellipses, mine, are everything, or seem to be, and are awful. What comes next reminds me of the beginning of the love song sung by that archetype of immobilized modernity (“Do I dare to eat a peach?”), J. Alfred Prufrock: “Let us go then, you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky.” Followed by caesura and cliff fall: “Like a patient etherised upon a table.”¹⁴ The evening and the sky, so potentially lovely, such requisite ingredients of a love poem, our deepest longings, are in “Prufrock” incapacitated, drugged, being operated on. In the same way, Levertov’s “alleys, / thoroughfares, wide boulevards” hold the lovely “evening primrose of sky” but these seize that loveliness “in steady calipers,” an instrument both useful and, misused, reductionistic. Thus ends part one of the poem. Again the seeming contradictions: the mind, which can see, and articulate, something as beautiful as a primrose sky, thus transfiguring the unexceptional into sacrament, also, instinctively, obsessively, calibrates. The person, the human being, who, thanks be to God, can celebrate “the world’s woods / deep-layered with wet leaves,” also discerns the mind’s imperialism, its imperiousness—which, therefore, is the world’s—that can cover creation’s woods, both literal and figurative, with concrete, capital, and conflict.

¹³ See Tim Vivian, “Christmas Context—What Mary Might Say to Walmart,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, December 22, 2013.

¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” in *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), in T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1971), 3.

II. *Personal and Political Adversatives*

Always the mind
 walking, working, stopping sometimes to kneel
 in awe of beauty, sometimes leaping, filled with the energy
 of delight, but never able to pass
 the wall, the wall
 of brick that crumbles and is replaced,
 of twisted iron,
 of rock,
 the wall that speaks, saying monotonously:
 Children and animals
 who cannot learn
 anything from suffering,
 suffer, are tortured, die
 in incomprehension.

Yet . . . yet . . . the mind—"always"—"walking, working," *can* push aside the reducible and reductionistic for the irreducible, "stopping sometimes to kneel / in awe of beauty, sometimes leaping, filled with the energy / of delight."

"Human Being" is a poem of adversatives (the one adversary ourselves). Despite—or, more painfully, because of?—our peripatetic minds, we are "never able to pass / the wall, the wall." The line break, doubling the wall's significance and intransigence, rebukes the poet's seeming naïveté, expressed earlier in the hopeful—now desperate?—repetitions of "walking."

I find Marcus Borg's observations about metaphor helpful here in reflecting on Levertov's "wall":

Intrinsic metaphor is shorthand for the metaphorical meanings intrinsic to the story [or poem] itself—the meanings that occur to a reader sensitive to the language of metaphor prior to taking into account (or even knowing) the specific historical associations of the language. *Historical metaphor* is shorthand for the additional metaphorical meanings that flow out of the specific historical associations of the language.¹⁵

Levertov published "Human Being" in book form in the collection *Life in the Forest* in 1978. Eavan Boland, without using the phrase,

¹⁵ Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, 206.

sees the poems from 1968–1982 as the poet’s “middle period,” a time when she was “less and less convinced that poetic responsibility can be discharged through private vision.” In Borg’s words, not only the poems, but also the poet, were becoming both “intrinsic” and “historical.” This period concomitantly saw “the growth of [Levertov’s] political activism,” according to Boland:

People are always asking me [Levertov wrote,] how I can reconcile poetry and political action, poetry and the talk of revolution. Don’t you feel, they say to me, that you and other poets are betraying your work as poets when you spend time participating in sit-ins, marching in the streets, helping to write leaflets, etc.[?] My answer is no; precisely because I am a poet, I know, and those other poets who do likewise know, that we must fulfill the poet’s total involvement in life in this aspect also.¹⁶

As with the poet, so with the priest—and each person ordained to the priesthood of all believers. Many of the images in “Human Being” thus become both intrinsic and historical metaphors for me—and, I hope, through the annotations of this essay, for younger readers. Levertov was born in 1923, the same year as my mother; like my parents, she lived through World War II (my father flew fighter-bombers over Europe) and then the Cold War. She published “Human Being” after Vietnam and during the dregs of the Cold War. The Berlin Wall was built in 1961, when Levertov was thirty-eight and I was ten. Is that wall in Berlin the (or a) historical metaphor behind “the wall, the wall”? For me it is. But that doesn’t delimit the metaphor; as Borg helpfully tells us, “wall” has its own intrinsic metaphorical meanings.

For many readers shading into their sixties like me, though, and presumably especially for many readers in the 1970s (the wall came down in 1989–1990), “the wall” has historical and political implications because of that barrier in Germany and that supposedly cold war. I was a child during part of that war and that cold, living on or near Strategic Air Command (SAC) bases: where I lived, I realized later, was always ground zero if that war had heated to boiling and beyond. As I covered my head under desks at school during air raid drills and was warned not to look outside at the latent mushroom cloud looming, overhead my father, an Air Force officer, was often piloting

¹⁶ Eavan Boland, “Introduction,” in Levertov, *The Collected Poems*, xii–xiii; the inset quotation is from Levertov’s essay “The Poet in the World” (1967).

a converted bomber; it was filled, in case Washington was vaporized, with the nation's telemetry and war codes. He used to bring my brother and me leftover boxed lunches from those flights. How banal we make the apocalyptic! But banality can also be lethal, both literally and metaphorically. As Walter Wink has so fully explicated, "Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world. It has been accorded the status of a religion, demanding from its devotees absolute obedience to death."¹⁷ Wink cites a large stained-glass window that dominates the chapel at the SAC base in Omaha where I lived: "The national security church thus becomes the kept court chaplain of the national security state."¹⁸

This was—and *is*—the "world of mechanical fictions" that Thomas Merton so powerfully excoriates in "Rain and the Rhinoceros."¹⁹ From his monastery in Kentucky, Merton wrote fiercely against America's—and the church's—Cold War neuroses and pathology—the "illusions of collective existence"—and, when censored by his Order for doing so, published his objections *samizdat*-style.²⁰ The fictions that Americans told themselves in the 1950s and 1960s, like the false self that (not "who") Merton tells us we habitually hide behind, were very real, and did very real damage. The recent disclosures about National Security Agency (NSA) spying cannot but remind veterans of those decades of the paranoia to which Americans are prone, and subject.²¹ Seemingly far away from such pathology and paranoia, in "Rain and the Rhinoceros" Merton is sitting in the woods in the rain with a Coleman

¹⁷ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1992), 13. See also Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 20–28, "Toward an Adequate Concept of Violence," which broadens the usual definitions of violence.

¹⁸ Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 28; on 334, n. 53, Mary Evelyn Jegen, SND describes the window.

¹⁹ Thomas Merton, "Rain and the Rhinoceros," in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 11. The rhinoceros refers to Ionesco's absurdist play *Rhinoceros*.

²⁰ Merton, *Raids*, 14; "Because we live in a womb of collective illusion, our freedom remains abortive" (16). On Merton during the Cold War, see Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 372–381.

²¹ See Kimberly Dozier and Stephen Braun, "NSA Collected Thousands Of Emails, Other Communications By Americans With No Terror Ties," *The Huffington Post*, August 21, 2013; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/21/nsa-email-collection_n_3791459.html; and Ellen Nakashima, "NSA gathered thousands of Americans' e-mails before court ordered it to revise its tactics," *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2013.

camping lantern; its slogan promises that the lantern “*Stretches days to give more hours of fun.*”²² I see now that Merton’s—and my own—sarcasm are expressions of, or cover for, “a hidden sense of loss.” In “Mourning for the Earth,” an essay on climate change that applies here, Katharine M. Preston observes that “part of our grief” in facing the ecological cataclysms of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, most self-inflicted, “may be an underlying feeling that some part of God is being lost”²³ But, in what seems like an oxymoronic declaration, we are losing more than God:

Decades ago, Joanna Macy spoke about the threat of nuclear annihilation. Her words are tragically appropriate to the reality of climate change today: “[E]very generation throughout history lived with the tacit certainty that there would be generations to follow. . . that its children and children’s children would walk the same Earth, under the same sky. . . . That certainty is now lost to us. . . . That loss, unmeasured and immeasurable, is the pivotal psychological reality of our time.”²⁴

Without speaking of loss, Merton nevertheless catalogues our forfeitures. In contrast to the hours of fun that Coleman sells, “There is no clock,” Merton sees, “that can measure the speech of this rain.” Merton’s rain is Levertov’s woods, his clock Levertov’s calipers. But “of course,” right on time, “at three-thirty A.M. the SAC plane goes over, red light winking low under the clouds, skimming the wooded summits on the south side of the valley, loaded with strong medicine. Very strong. Strong enough to burn up all these woods and stretch our hours of fun into eternities.”²⁵ Merton’s absurdist tone, the “fun” he envisions, recalls the film *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) and Slim Pickens’s character a-whoopin’ and a-hollerin’, waving his cowboy hat, as he rides an A-bomb downwards from his SAC bomber into Armageddon. Absurdity, often the best exegete of realism, also figures in a

²² Merton, *Raids*, 13.

²³ Katharine M. Preston, “Mourning for the Earth,” *Sojourners* (August 2013): 22; <http://sojo.net/magazine/2013/08/mourning-earth>.

²⁴ Preston, “Mourning for the Earth,” 22. For a powerful evocation of the certainty and loss of Native Americans, now every American’s, see the trilogy by Kent Nerburn: *Neither Wolf nor Dog: On Forgotten Roads with an Indian Elder*, *The Wolf at Twilight: An Indian Elder’s Journey through a Land of Ghosts and Shadows*, and *The Girl Who Sang to the Buffalo: A Child, an Elder, and the Light from an Ancient Sky*.

²⁵ Merton, *Raids*, 14.

famous parodic poster of the period, “Instructions to Patrons in Case of Nuclear Attack.” The poster mimics and mocks actual notices of the time: after five prosaic commandments for what to do in case of nuclear conflagration, the sixth directive bids: “Immediately upon seeing the brilliant flash of nuclear explosion, bend over and place your head firmly between your knees.” The seventh and last instruction, appropriately, is “Then kiss your ass goodbye.”

One could protest here that nothing in the poem is explicitly political; thus I am politicizing it, packing the poem with my transplanted sorrow. But Levertov, as I have intimated, was an intensely political poet, so political ligatures are not only *de facto* but *de jure*: “The political event is personal to him or her,” she insists. “One is personally implicated in it in some way.”²⁶ The vocation of the poet—and, thus, of the reader—is to take the inessential and make it essential, dig the ore of the quotidian and fashion it into what’s enduring, observe the vanity of the inattentive and shape the observation “into the timelessness of moral outcry” (as Vietnam in 1967 blazed into manifold and spiraling circles of hell):

Gowns of gold sequins are fitted,
Sharp-glinting. What harsh rustlings
Of silver moiré there are,
To remind me of shrapnel splinters.²⁷

No theologian could better describe the Fall and our very unoriginal sins. The poet, like the theologian, like the person of faith, is—or should be—political. The Incarnation requires it. As the Franciscan Murray Bodo observes in his thoughtful and moving memoir about his friend:

Levertov joined anti-war protest groups; her husband Mitchell Goodman was arrested with Dr. Benjamin Spock for counseling draft resisters. Along with Jesuit Priest Daniel Berrigan and her poet friend Muriel Rukeyser, she traveled to Hanoi during

²⁶ Audrey T. Rodgers, *Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Engagement* (Cranbury, N. J.: Associated University Presses, 1993), 76. The quotation is from the epigraph to chapter four, which is entitled “Vietnam and the Sixties: ‘la selva oscura.’” See also Dana Greene, *Denise Levertov: A Poet’s Life* (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2012), esp. chap. 5, “Staying Alive,” 94–112.

²⁷ Boland, “Introduction,” in Levertov, *The Collected Poems*, xiii; Levertov, “Tenebrae,” in *The Collected Poems*, 343–344.

the Vietnam War; she joined anti-nuclear groups, she spoke out against U.S. involvement with oppressive regimes in Central America. And all the while she was writing poems of protest that centered on calamitous public and political realities and which seemed a radical departure from her previous poems of quiet personal epiphany derived from contemplation of her immediate personal world.²⁸

“Human Being” well combines “personal epiphany” and protest of “public and political realities.” As Bodo points out, “Gradually, however, it became clear that this was not a radical departure,” and gives his reason: “Because of the Incarnation, God is made present among us personally in Christ’s gift of His Spirit and collectively in the mystery of the Mystical Body of Christ. Betrayals of Christ happen, therefore, both on the individual and collective level, the two poles of Levertov’s poetry.”²⁹ War, like its bastard offspring poverty, hunger, fear, and xenophobia, as Martin Luther King, Jr. clearly saw, is a betrayal of Christ.³⁰

Levertov sees that for the poet—for the human being; for the citizen (Aristotle’s “political animal”);³¹ for all of us—the imagination “synergizes intellect, emotion and instinct.”³² “Human Being,” at a—penultimate?—level, is a poem about mystery, but mystery, if spiritually authentic, never elbows politics and history out of the way; it embraces them with the biblical and eucharistic kiss of love and peace (see Romans 16:16 and 1 Corinthians 16:20, among many). As Levertov herself recognizes, and as this essay will discuss, the “acknowledgment, and celebration, of mystery probably constitutes the most consistent theme of my poetry from its very beginnings.”³³ Imagination, backpacking cross-country into mystery, *with* mystery,

²⁸ Murray Bodo, OFM, “Denise Levertov: A Memoir and Appreciation,” *Image 27* (Summer 2000); <http://imagejournal.org/page/journal/articles/issue-27/bodo-essay>.

²⁹ Bodo, “Denise Levertov.”

³⁰ See Martin Luther King, Jr., “War in Vietnam vs. War on Poverty”; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0tA7DWAopU>; and Drew Dellinger and Walter Dellinger, “Why MLK Took On Poverty And War Along With Racism,” *The Huffington Post*, August 28, 2013; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/28/mlk-poverty_n_3832548.html.

³¹ See R. G. Mulgan, “Aristotle’s Doctrine That Man Is a Political Animal,” *Hermes* 102 (1974): 438–445: “Aristotle defines *politikón* as having one common *érgon*, i.e. work or function. . . . The defining characteristic is therefore simply cooperating or working together in some common enterprise” (439).

³² Bodo, “Denise Levertov.”

³³ Denise Levertov, “A Poet’s View,” quoted in Bodo, “Denise Levertov.”

is, Levertov believes, “the perceptive organ through which it is possible, though not inevitable, to experience God.” And, as Bodo points out, imagination also takes the imaginative, which means the empathetic, into the Devil’s Canyon and Death Valley of “injustice and the horrors of war.”³⁴ Levertov confirms that at least for her “it’s only out of that degree of *intimacy* with the political or topical,” camping on the desert floor, because of soul-destroying heat walking only by night “—that internalization—it’s only out of that [that] good political poetry can be created”:³⁵

The same war

continues.

We have breathed the grits of it in, all our lives,
our lungs are pocked with it,
the mucous membrane of our dreams
coated with it, the imagination
filmed over with the gray filth of it.³⁶

“All our lives,” like Merton’s “of course,” is shattering (“Of course . . . the SAC plane goes over”). The Cold War eats its young in Korea and Vietnam; Vietnam marches into El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua; then follow the enacted nightmare parables of Grenada, Panama, Bosnia, Libya; “the war on terror,” Afghanistan, and Iraq. War, as nuclear cataclysm is for Merton, now *de rigueur*.³⁷ In the context of Merton’s essay, Merriam-Webster’s definition of the French phrase is beautifully ironic and—I’m certain Merton would say—hilarious in its own twisted way: “prescribed or required by fashion, etiquette, or custom: proper.” Two simple words, Merton’s and the French expression, tell us that the monk, however cloistered, however deep in contemplation; the grade-school boy, however lost in play or study or

³⁴ Bodo, “Denise Levertov.”

³⁵ Rodgers, *Denise Levertov*, 76.

³⁶ Denise Levertov, “Life at War,” quoted in Rodgers, *Denise Levertov*, 84; in Levertov, *Collected Poems*, 340–341. See Andrew J. Bacevich, *Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War* (New York: Henry Holt / Metropolitan Books, 2010) and *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³⁷ See Walter Wink’s reflection on “the myth of redemptive violence” (his coinage) in the Enuma Elish and in Western civilization generally in *Engaging the Powers*, 13–31.

daydreaming at his school desk; and the church-goer, however immersed in prayer, cannot wish away “the greed of machinery that does not sleep, the hum of power that eats up the night.”³⁸ As if to prove my point, as I worked on this essay an op-ed piece appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, “U.S., China and an Unthinkable War”:

The specter of economic doomsday makes war between China and the United States as unthinkable as fear of nuclear doomsday made Soviet–U.S. war. Or does it? In fact, Chinese and American military planners *are thinking in exquisite detail, as they are expected to do*, about how to win such a conflict. The problem is that the specific plans being concocted could make hostilities less unthinkable, and two great powers with every reason to avoid war could find themselves in one.³⁹

Exquisite. Irony doesn’t drip here; it hemorrhages. The italicized words above (my emphasis) are as startling as Merton’s—in fact, Merton could have written them for “Rain and the Rhinoceros.” “How to Win a Nuclear War” is a title that could accompany, *ad absurdum*, or *ab absurdo*, Merton’s lamentation for the Holocaust, “Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces”: “How we made them sleep and purified them / How we perfectly cleaned up the people and worked a big heater.”⁴⁰ Nuclear holocaust, we have learned, like the eponymous holocaust from which it gets its name, despite the newspaper article’s title, is *not* unthinkable; as the piece points out in absurdist echoes of the Cold War’s Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), “Such China–U.S. reciprocal planning implies a textbook case of ‘crisis instability’ in which the price for failing to attack before the opponent does is defeat. . . . Such spiraling logic can turn confrontation into conflagration.” The authors of this piece, however, do not seem overly alarmed. Perhaps that is the real judgment.

In the same way as the SAC bomber in Merton’s essay, in “Human Being” the wall stands in part two of the poem as a monument

³⁸ Merton, *Raids*, 10.

³⁹ David C. Gompert and Terrence K. Kelly, “U.S., China and an Unthinkable War,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 26, 2013, emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, “Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces,” in *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1967), 118–121. For background to the poem, see The Healing Project, “Dante’s Ghost,” March 24, 2012; <http://thehealingprojectwebcast.blogspot.com/2012/03/thomas-merton-chant-to-be-used-in.html>.

to modern, undifferentiated dread and, after momentary surcease in part three, returns in part four—and it appears that it will haunt the human's night as well as day. In part two the wall does crumble but, terrifyingly, is always “replaced,” brick replaced and fortified with “twisted iron” and “rock.” Replaced by whom? The passive voice prescinds from human responsibility and, thus, dystopian, adds the fear of unknown agency to the wall's power. As Pope Francis recently warned, “We have created new idols. The worship of the golden calf of old (Exodus 32:15–34) has found a new and heartless image in the cult of money and the dictatorship of an economy which is faceless and lacking any truly humane goal.”⁴¹

We become our fears. The intransigence and immutability of the wall that Levertov depicts reminds me of a song by Roger Waters from the same decade as the poem, “Another Brick in the Wall,” performed by the rock group Pink Floyd. That song has the devastating refrain, “All in all it's just another brick in the wall. / All in all you're just another brick in the wall.” “It” and “you” interchangeable. Resistance, both Levertov and Waters seem to say, is futile. But—his song, and her poems, by their expression, their very being, articulate the sacred, and therefore mock futility; both protest; they dynamite 1984's seemingly sempiternal Ministry of Truth: “We don't need no education / We don't need no thought control.”⁴²

In a reversal of time or, more likely, as a demonstration of time's synchronicity (which we, linear, often seek to deny), in Pink Floyd's album *The Wall*, Eliot's Prufrock, after the horrors of World War I, has, mutant, “grown up” to be the regimented and blighted children of England after World War II, another war, a different cold. (Hence the Beatles' “Eleanor Rigby” in 1966: “All the lonely people, / Where do they all come from? / All the lonely people, / Where do they all belong?”) Waters, who lost his father to World War II, believes that what he captured in his music in the 1970s is, like Levertov's poem from the same decade, still very relevant:

When [*The Wall*] was first done, it was 32 years ago, and I was bemoaning the fact I was a child of the Second World War, and I had lost my father, and that has a severe fracturing nature on the

⁴¹ Pope Francis, “A Heartless Cult of Money,” *Sojourners* (September-October 2013); <http://sojo.net/magazine/2013/09/heartless-cult-money>.

⁴² <http://www.pink-floyd-lyrics.com/html/the-wall-lyrics.html>.

family, and it made me very angry about a lot of things. Since then I've realized that somehow the piece is not about little Roger losing his father in the Second World War; it's more universal than that. It's about all the children that lose their fathers and continue to lose their fathers because those of us who have the power are still almost entirely devoted to the idea that our only responsibility is to maximize the bottom line and make profits.⁴³

Waters's wall is mute, and dehumanizing in its muteness. Levertov's wall by contrast speaks (and here lies hope), over and over and over. But insistence becomes monotonous, all too clear a sign that its questions receive no answers, or impatient answers, as when an exasperated parent says "Because" to a child's importunate "Why?" The wall insists on asking perhaps the most basic question of theism and theodicy, the angriest—and most understandable—shaking of the fist against a seemingly distant or helpless—or, worse, hapless—God, the God of omnipotence and Auschwitz, the God who died in the death camps:

Children and animals
 who cannot learn
 anything from suffering,
 suffer, are tortured, die
 in incomprehension.

Levertov elsewhere explicates the question hidden within this assertion: "Suffering in those who can learn something from suffering is explicable because it can be looked upon as a painful but necessary part of growth, but the suffering of those who, as far as one can see, cannot learn from their suffering is a profound mystery and serves as a stumbling block to many people, not just to me."⁴⁴ One wonders how aware Levertov was of her choice of words here; they suggest the dangers of prose. Her explanation of explicable suffering is partly true, partly clichéd, part of Christian theological tradition, and partly reprehensible: Would *you* tell someone who is suffering that it is for his or her own good and necessary growth? The first pastoral death I dealt with as a new priest was the accidental suffocation of a child in

⁴³ James C. McKinley, Jr., "The Wall Goes On, and Grows Even Longer," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2012.

⁴⁴ Rodgers, *Denise Levertov*, 147–148.

her crib; the cosmos seemed to be vomiting. That child would now be twenty-five. Suffering begets growth only in retrospect, and after survival. For St. Paul (1 Cor. 1:23) the stumbling block is “Christ crucified”; for Levertov above, it’s suffering without growth. One wonders what Jesus learned, what growth he experienced, while writhing and gasping for breath on the cross.

In his thoughtful reflection on “The Grand Inquisitor” in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, Rowan Williams observes that “Ivan’s catalogue of innocent suffering, specifically the sufferings of abused and tortured children, is probably the most eloquent attack on easy theories of divine justice or divine reparation ever written by a Christian.”⁴⁵ In concord with Levertov, he points out that the argument between Alyosha and Ivan is “not so much about whether God exists as about whether belief in God is morally defensible.”⁴⁶ Ivan challenges Alyosha whether he would guarantee “the welfare and stability of the universe at the cost of torturing to death one little girl.” Alyosha replies that he could not. Williams honestly concludes by acknowledging that even “in the reality of [God’s] loving embrace of the tormented world,” we still have no general theory why things are as they are or “why human beings are capable of unspeakable cruelties towards the innocent.”⁴⁷ Mystery now as agony.

Since mystery and agony can be star-crossed lovers, Levertov’s poem and Williams’s reflections are not mere whistling past a literary or theological graveyard; I am working on this essay a day or two after seeing on the evening news the horrific images of gassed children dead in Syria. Such horror is now instantaneously digital. Williams understands the Inquisitor’s “love” for humanity as ultimately “a desperate wish to protect it from reality.” But, he asks, what does such evasion “make of someone,” like Jesus, “who asks for no protection, yet does not react with either despair or violence?”⁴⁸

Dostoyevsky’s nineteenth-century parable draws its power partly because the sacrifice (etymologically: “making sacred”) of a child is so unthinkable. But for Levertov amid the interminable wars and

⁴⁵ Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 120.

⁴⁶ Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 119.

⁴⁷ Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 126.

⁴⁸ Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 125.

rumors of wars of the twentieth, and now the twenty-first, century,⁴⁹ the suffering of children and animals now merely numbs, despite, or because of, the existential imperative that we question God about suffering: the wall speaks its incomprehensible truth “monotonously,” as a letter writer to the *Los Angeles Times* observed in December 2013, when the paper noted yet one more school shooting only on page ten of the paper. Instead of the four horsemen of the apocalypse (Revelation 6:1–8), we have suffering and the interrogatory of suffering riding a tandem bicycle, endlessly circling a circus ring. Ten years after the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the news of the depredations and death there has become monotonous. Early in those wars I would read articles about “35 Killed in Suicide Bombing”; ten years on, I see the same daily headlines (now orphaned far from the front page) about the Middle East, and move on with barely a glance. Not only do I not read the articles, I hardly notice the now-atrophied headlines: I *see* them, but they no longer offer insight, certainly not vision. In the ashes of vision lurks recidivist nightmare; nighttimes, and lifetimes, of shock and awe. My mind’s eye still sees the phosphorescence of nocturnal explosions in Baghdad, a charnel-house Fourth of July.

The headlines now are uncomfortably numb on the page, betokening body parts and screams of despair or, worse, the silent catechism of peacefully dead children, each day’s newspaper merely one more brick in the wall, the wall now part of our modern tower of Babel signifying the forgetfulness of violence. As Levertov concludes part two of the poem, summarizing our age in a single word, it all adds up to “incomprehension.” And not only for dying children. Perhaps, it turns out, not even especially for dying children.

Levertov’s wall, Berlin’s wall, Roger Waters’s wall, all the human suffering, all the lonely people: at this point in Levertov’s poem, half-way through, what can possibly save us from despair? Rowan Williams offers two reasons, the first theistic, the second not necessarily so. Although we will never have a “theory about why the universe is as it is” (such a theory would be reductionistic at best and delusional at worst) or why “human beings are capable of unspeakable cruelties,” if we nevertheless can recognize God “in such a place,” “humanity can be taken with the immense seriousness of unreserved love,” “a humanity that is actually and timelessly the object of love.” But Williams goes

⁴⁹ On Levertov and Vietnam, see Rodgers, *Denise Levertov*, Chapter 4, “Vietnam and the Sixties: ‘la selva oscura,’” 76–115.

further; he is responding to Ivan Karamazov and the Grand Inquisitor, but he is also answering the twentieth- and twenty-first-century neo-atheists and nihilists: “If humanity is only the doomed and deluded herd of the Inquisitor’s imagining, why is the death of a child so unforgivable an outrage?”⁵⁰ Perhaps outrage, or at least such outrage, is the best argument we have for God’s existence.

III. Concelebration

This human being, each night nevertheless
 summoning—with a breath blown at a flame,
or hand’s touch
 on the lamp-switch—darkness,
silently utters,
 impelled as if by a need to cup the palms
 and drink from a river,
the words, “Thanks.”
 Thanks for this day, a day of my life.”
And wonders.

Despite or because of all this—and perhaps we are, finally, fully human only when we are prepositional—in part three of “Human Being”: “This human being, each night nevertheless . . . / silently utters, . . . / the words, ‘Thanks. / Thanks for this day, a day of my life.’ / And wonders.” Without “And wonders,” Levertov’s thanksgiving could be dismissed merely as bipolar, a momentary high before life’s ever-lurking muggers and rapists make assured their visitations. But because we have the wall, must face up to the wall, “Thanks. / Thanks for this day,” in its doubling, stands as rejoinder to the wall’s doublet. But it’s much more than remonstrance; it is courage crafted from thanksgiving’s image and likeness. Following such thanksgiving and courage, “and wonders” concludes the third part of the poem. Suffering and thanksgiving, married, bring *both* wonder *and* wondering. This conclusion points once again, open, toward the poem’s final words, also twinned, also open-ended, ever pointing, pointing while walking.

In part three the human being has physically stopped walking—it is night, at home—but the mind, as in parts one and two, is still walking. Night here is not an alien and threatening other but rather a friend whom the human being invites “with a breath blown at a flame,

⁵⁰ Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 126.

/ or hand's touch / on the lamp-switch. . . ." Darkness concelebrates with human agency; together they offer thanksgiving: "Thanks for this day, a day of my life." In her study of Levertov's poetry, Audrey T. Rodgers appositely points out that "in Levertov's poetry, the sheer exhilaration of *being alive* surpasses all chaos and despair."⁵¹

IV. Into the Day's Brilliance

Pulls up the blankets, looking
 into nowhere, always in doubt.
 And takes strange pleasure
 in having repeated once more the childish formula,
 a pleasure in what is seemly.
 And drifts to sleep, downstream
 on murmuring currents of doubt and praise,
 the wall shadowy, that tomorrow
 will cast its own familiar, chill, clear-cut shadow
 into the day's brilliance.

In our sublunary world of ambiguity, imagination, like prayer, can be, in Levertov's words, "the perceptive organ" capable of experiencing and expressing God. Or it can partner with the soul's fevered night sweats that signal illness, but that also, in faith, betoken recovery. In either case, or both, "And drifts to sleep, downstream" images, at least for me, the final lines of "Sunday Morning," Wallace Stevens's rebuttal to the Christian Sabbath:

She hears, upon that water without sound,
 A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine
 Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
 It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay." . . .
 At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
 Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
 Downward to darkness, on extended wings.⁵²

Levertov's kinetic uncertainty counters Stevens's "complacencies of the peignoir" and her "sheer exhilaration" confronts his "chaos and despair." In toto this is true, but exhilaration, we will see, will be

⁵¹ Rodgers, *Denise Levertov*, 111.

⁵² Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1972), 66–70.

hard-won. Can only be hard-won. In the midst of the poem here we again confront the adversative—darkness is ambiguous, even ambivalent. The words of thanksgiving that conclude part three are now, in part four, “the childish formula” that offers “a pleasure in what is seemly,” what is, in the words of the eucharistic prayer in the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church, “very meet, right, and our bounden duty.” But what is “in keeping with accepted standards and appropriate to the circumstances”—the definition of “seemly”—will not carry the human being very far. Many readers here—now, in reading, participants in memory, fellow poets and theologians with Levertov—will remember their own childish formulas, the ones taught them by loving adults often warding off darkness: “Now I lay me down to sleep . . .” Were these, after all, only apotropaic talismans? Or were they, in their petitions for “Mom and Dad, Gramps and Granny,” a child’s own measure of thanksgiving? Not either/or but rather both/and: Eastern religion’s non-dualism carried on the wings of Judeo-Christian angels to a child’s bedroom in the West.

Even before sleep, the human being is present progressive, “pulls up the blankets, looking. . . .” Now, instead of walking, looking. The looking here is still the mind’s, unable to still itself at end of day, “looking / into nowhere, always in doubt.”⁵³ At the beginning of the poem doubt is generalized (“walking / in doubt from childhood on”); in part two, with the suffering of children and animals, it becomes local. This locative corroborates what Rowan Williams suggests: doubt “not so much about whether God exists as about whether belief in God is morally defensible.” And doubt brings with it its favorite dark companion, denizen of both daylight and darkness: the wall. In part two “the wall, the wall” seems to be sinister, “of twisted iron, / of rock.” But here, again, everything is ambiguous. The wall, unlike the human being, has no agency; it is passive rather than present progressive. Yet the wall speaks. The human being wants to know, mind is always walking and looking . . . and wondering: Who rebuilds the wall?

With the Berlin Wall, we know (we think) who built it, the seemingly simple partition between good and evil: the wicked Communists on one side, the moral West on the other. But that “certainty”

⁵³ It seems that Levertov values the mind to excess, and this, too, makes her modern. The mystical and monastic tradition in Christianity, as well as in Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam, advises us to still the mind, “thoughts buzzing like flies around meat” (Bruce Cockburn, “Waiting for the Moon” [1981]: <http://cockburnproject.net/songs&music/wftm.html>).

begs—and pleads for—another question: In what way did we in the West contribute to that wall? As the Treaty of Versailles contributed to World War II, the United States's Cold War support for the mujahedeen in Afghanistan helped bring fire to the Taliban and the beheading of people for partying.⁵⁴ Once again, headlines as I write this essay corroborate the questions that Levertov's wall still raises:

- “The Risk of Taking on Syria”: “Quick hits rarely achieve enduring political goals—and often produce more costs or unintended consequences than benefits.”⁵⁵
- “CIA Files Show U.S. Was Involved In Saddam Hussein's Iranian Gas Attacks, *Foreign Policy Reports*”: “The U.S. government may be considering military action in response to chemical strikes near Damascus. But a generation ago, America's military and intelligence communities knew about and did nothing to stop a series of nerve gas attacks far more devastating than anything Syria has seen, *Foreign Policy* has learned.”⁵⁶

The picture of Saddam Hussein with U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, when Hussein was a bastard, but *our* bastard, has become our parodic and obscene poster. You can't make this stuff up. Given the blowback we have witnessed the past ten years in Iraq and Afghanistan, how was the Berlin Wall and the murder of those who died trying to circumvent it different from the fire-bombing of Dresden or the instructions that ordered children to cower beneath bomb-shelter desks while fathers overhead flew instruments and instrumentation of not only death but nuclear apocalypse?

The wall here is more like the wall of Pink Floyd—it just *is*, has its own being, and, therefore, is much more terrifying. But again the ambiguity: the wall, though “shadowy,” speaks truth, the truth about children and animals who cannot learn from suffering and, thus, “die / in incomprehension.” Truth, however menacing, cannot be put away by sleep, just as the Atomic Age cannot be denied from within a

⁵⁴ Muhammad Lila and Aleem Agha, “Taliban Behead 17 for Singing and Dancing,” ABC News, August 27, 2012.

⁵⁵ Robin Wright, “The Risk of Taking on Syria,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 2013.

⁵⁶ Shane Harris and Matthew M. Aid, “Exclusive: CIA Files Prove America Helped Saddam as He Gassed Iran,” *Foreign Policy*, August 26, 2013.

monastery: "If you are looking for the Atomic Age," Thomas Merton insists, "look inside yourself: because you are it. And so, alas, am I."⁵⁷ As we (the human being is now fully us, not a mere abstraction) drift "to sleep, downstream / on murmuring currents of doubt and praise" (a succinct summary of parts one to three), there is still the wall, always "the wall shadowy." In darkness there should be no shadow, but the world of the poem, that is, the world of myth and symbol, bears incandescent realities and truths undreamt of in our mundane philosophies.⁵⁸

Now drifting into sleep, we nevertheless know that the shadow is "clear-cut," "chill," yet "familiar," like family: tomorrow, the wall "will cast its own familiar, chill, clear-cut shadow / into the day's brilliance." Again the ambiguity. Always the ambiguity. Until, craving certainty, even lusting for it, even willing to do violence for it, we want to scream, "Answers, poet, give us answers! Even totalitarian ones! Political *or* religious!" But part four, as parts one through three, ends not with answers, but not with complete ambiguity either. And so we return to Levertov's abiding theme of mystery. Parts one and two conclude with uncertainty—how can calipers measure "evening primrose of sky" (part one)? How do we live with "incomprehension" (part two)?—and we know that too much uncertainty becomes, in its perverse way, terrifying certainty, the certainty bestowed by dictators, whether personal, political, or theological. By contrast (again the adversative), parts three and four end with ambiguity that becomes more open road rather than the despair of unmitigated insecurity—or certainty. Concelebration. Concelebration, therefore, betokens movement, "into the day's brilliance," the concluding words of the poem:

the wall shadowy, that tomorrow
will cast its own familiar, chill, clear-cut shadow
into the day's brilliance.

⁵⁷ Thomas Merton, "Prologue: Mysticism in the Nuclear Age," in Thomas P. McDonnell, ed., *A Thomas Merton Reader*, revised edition (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 374.

⁵⁸ In *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5, Hamlet rebukes Horatio for his inability to see: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

