

From *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 May 2004: 11-12

Albert Gelpi and Robert J. Bertholf eds.

THE LETTERS OF ROBERT DUNCAN AND DENISE LEVERTOV

857pp. Stanford: Stanford University Press

\$39.95 paper

ISBN 0-8047-4569-2

In June 1953, the San Francisco poet Robert Duncan sent a fan letter in the form of a poem to his fellow poet Denise Levertov in New York. Duncan had come across a Levertov poem called "The Shifting" in Cid Corman's *Origin*, one of the little magazines associated with Black Mountain College and its then rector Charles Olson. The poem, later published as "Turning," begins:

The shifting, the shaded  
change of pleasure

soft warm ashes in place of fire  
--out, irremediable

and a door blown open:  
planes tilt, interact, objects  
fuse, disperse

this chair further from that table—hold it!

What arrested Duncan's attention, he later tells Levertov, was the poem's "showing forth of reality," a "presentational immediacy" that is never merely Imagist: rather, objects are invoked and transformed so as to define "inner feeling."

Duncan's homage poem, "An A Muse Ment" opens with the lines:

in  
spired/ this aspirate  
the aspirant almost  
without breath  
it is a breath out  
breathed spiraling—An aspiration  
pictured as the familiar spirit  
hoverer

above  
each loved each  
a word giving up its ghost

Not surprisingly, Levertov did not know what to make of this obscure punning letter-poem, signed only with the initials R.D, and thought its author was making fun of her. She wrote to inquire, and so began a correspondence that lasted for over twenty years, terminating only when, in the light of the Vietnam War, the two poets quarreled so bitterly about the relation of the poetic to the political that their great friendship ended.

The correspondence, now presented to us whole in a monumental edition produced by Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi, with an especially judicious Introduction by Gelpi and useful appendix, glossary of names, chronology, and notes is an indispensable addition to our understanding of American poetry in the postwar decades. Even readers who have reservations about the work of both poets, will find these letters nothing short of riveting.

Levertov and Duncan represent the spiritual wing of Black Mountain poetics. Although they met through and deeply admired the poetry of Robert Creeley, their own versions of heterodox Protestant thought —Duncan's a form of hermetic gnosticism, Levertov's an incarnational theology that culminated in her conversion to Catholicism—are quite different from Creeley's terse and skeptical poetry of presence, or, for that matter, from Olson's historical mythopoesis. Indeed, though Duncan thinks of himself as an heir to Ezra Pound, and Levertov has regularly been presented as writing in the tradition of her early mentor William Carlos Williams, both largely by-pass Modernism to return to the Romantic tradition.

Levertov, the daughter of an Hasidic Jew from Russia, who emigrated to England where he was ordained an Anglican priest, served as a civilian nurse during World War II in London and then in Paris, where in 1947 she met and married a Jewish ex-G.I. from Brooklyn, the writer Mitch Goodman, best known, in later years, as one of the Chicago Seven protesters against the Vietnam War. Duncan, twenty-two years old at the time of Pearl Harbor, was drafted in 1941 but soon received a medical discharge and began his literary/theosophical studies. Yet neither the war nor the Holocaust—nor, for that matter, the momentous global upheavals of the '50s--play any sort of role in the Duncan-Levertov correspondence. Rather, theirs is a world of poetry as vocation-- poetry as vision, special knowledge, and epiphany.

At the same time-- and this is the paradox of the correspondence—both poets are also quite practical in their day-to-day interchanges: they exchange manuscripts, critique each others' lyrics, comment at length on their mutual poet friends and enemies, and

participate actively in the poetry culture, East and West of the fifties and sixties. Money, although by no means plentiful, is not an insurmountable problem: there is, in other words, always a Guggenheim to apply for (and, in both cases, eventually won), a short-term teaching assignment for which no A.B., much less a Ph.D, is required, an anthology appearance in the works (the most famous being Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* of 1959, in which both Levertov and Duncan were featured), and a host of prizes to be won. To take just random examples: Levertov served as poetry editor of *The Nation* from 1963-65 and was an honorary scholar at the Radcliffe Institute from 1964-66; Duncan received the Harriet Monroe Memorial Prize in 1961. In these years, moreover, one could live on very little in New York or Oakland, in Maine or Oaxaca or Mallorca. Accordingly, unlike today's poets, most of whom earn their living as full-time academics or hold "day jobs," Duncan and Levertov could concentrate on their vocation.

At the beginning, their exchange has a workshop quality, filled with practical talk about specific poems. Thus, when Duncan sends Levertov, "A Storm of White," "the first poem since the move here [to Stinson Beach])," he explains:

It starts with the surf-line that fascinated me when during the storm several days ago there was a spell of heavy whiteness, an obscurity of everything in which the known demarcations were gone, and the breaking waves became a pun on the horizon, begins there and goes straight to a cry out for Mr. Pumpkin [Duncan's cat] so that when I tried to read it aloud to Jess, I could not read that line "O dear grey cat. . ." and had at last the full paroxysm of pain I had held back as best I could. God! Everything lost in life rehearses in a little grief. And this loss in the midst of happiness. (# 81)

In her response, Levertov refers to "the sea poem (which I love) but which seems to me to end before the end," namely, with the line "upon answering obscurity." Once the cat passage is omitted, she suggests, this is "one of yr *best* poems." Duncan produces a pruned version (#87) but I the end restores the missing lines, sensing that "the veracity of experience" of the cat's death, which had, after all, prompted the original reaction to the storm could not be tampered with. Levertov remains skeptical: perhaps, she suggests, the cat section might come at the beginning of the poem, "then the sea itself, then back to the cat & death at the end." She also objects to line 9, "ghosts of blackness or verdure," urging Duncan to replace "verdure" with the more concrete "green." But Duncan, always leery of revision as a rational check on the spontaneous imagination, published "A Storm of White" as it was, verdure, cat, and all, in *The Opening of the Field* (1960).

Such worrying over detail –and we often find similar discussion of Levertov’s poems–is not, as it might seem, a formalist concern for *le mot juste*. Rather, the poets’ dialogue on the ontology of the poem has to do with their mutual faith in intuition and inspiration. “The acceptance of accident,” writes Levertov in 1958, “--the letting-go of the top layer of mind & its prejudices and restraints—the entering of magic worlds one cannot direct. . . the religious sense of abandonment—all that is very attractive to me” (#86). She is quick to add a disclaimer: “I’ve as strong a love of care, concern, intelligence—all the craftsman qualities.” But if craftsmanship is understood in terms of the Projectivist law that FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT,” it is easy to turn the spotlight on the inner self. “Only intuition,” writes Duncan, only “the life feeling or our inner nature, can apprehend the formal necessity” (#254). And since the poet’s intuition does not always communicate itself to the reader, there is much room for spirited debate.

As soulmates, Levertov and Duncan regularly praise each others’ work as “beautiful” or “wonderful.” But they can be icily dismissive of those outside their circle. Beat poetry (except for Ginsberg’s “Howl” and “Kaddish”) comes in for scathing criticism, New York poetry is considered trivial, as is, for Levertov, the painting of Jackson Pollock or Franz Kline. And even Emily Dickinson is suspect: “There’s something cold and perversely smug about E.D.,” Levertov tells Duncan, “that has always rebuffed my feeling for individual poems of hers. . . .She wrote some great things—saw strangely—makes one shudder with new truths—but ever and again one feels (or I do)—‘Jesus, what a bitchy little spinster’” (#182). Duncan, who does not share this contempt and admires the Abstract Expressionists, has his own *bêtes noires*: his venom is directed at the Establishment poetics of Robert Lowell and John Berryman, James Wright and , later, Hayden Carruth. Both poets are surprisingly nasty about Donald Allen, whose *New American Poetry*, after all, put them on the larger poetry map. At one point, Duncan declares that he refuses to be included in the Allen anthology, which gives equal time to such upstarts as Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery. And Levertov is curiously unkind to her lifetime publisher James Laughlin, who, she remarks, “has *chosen* the most rigidly conventional kind of life for his own . . . a Connecticut version of British ‘Country’.” “It is always instructive,” she adds, “to be reminded of the rift that exists between the rich who patronize & ourselves who are makers” (#109).

It is into this context that politics intrudes in the form of the Vietnam War. Ironically, it is Duncan, who first writes tasteless lines about the “head of [Hubert] Humphrey” emerging from the “ass-hole” of Lyndon Johnson (“Earth’s Winter Song,” 1966—see Appendix), and Levertov who castigates him for failing to produce a Dantesque

vision of evil. The tables are then turned, and Duncan begins to chide Levertov for her didactic anti-war poems, insisting that "The poet's role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it" (#452), and that it is not morality but "language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree" [Pound's term] that "is our responsibility if we be language workers." Their quarrel becomes increasingly bitter, and when Levertov learns in the mid-seventies that Duncan had imputed false consciousness to her war poems, had suggested to an editor that the subtext of "Life at War" is private sexual anxiety, it is all over between them.

In his Introduction, Gelpi pinpoints the central philosophical and religious differences between the two that caused this tragic but perhaps inevitable rift. But what he doesn't quite explain is why these once apolitical poets—poets whose correspondence has virtually nothing to say about the events of the Cold War or the revelations of genocide coming out of the Soviet Union—suddenly become activated in response to the Vietnam crisis. Like many of their friends in the affluent fifties and early sixties, Duncan and Levertov evidently had faith in American exceptionalism: the killing fields were dreadful but, after all, we were not to blame. Hence, the first U. S. bombings of Hanoi come as a terrible shock, prompting, in Levertov's case, such poems as "Staying Alive," whose chant "Revolution or death, revolution or death," is followed by the response, "Revolution of course. Death is Mayor Daley," as if the mayor of Chicago had the makings of a Hitler or Stalin. Such bathos is too much even for Denise's great friend Robert, who now lectures her on the misuse of such images as the spider's web in "Tenebrae" (see #452), returning to the Poundian precept that the poet's first responsibility is to the language itself. But this position can be interpreted--and Levertov does so interpret it-- as a retreat from their shared commitment to a visionary poetry.

One needn't take literally Adorno's stance on the impossibility of writing lyric poetry after Auschwitz to see that the particular brand of neo-Romanticism found in Levertov and Duncan is not equal to the task of dealing head-on with the horrors of war, whether World War II or the Vietnam War. The context, to put it baldly, just isn't there. Earlier Romantics from Blake to Yeats in Britain, Emerson to Whitman in America, were, let's remember, fully involved in the actual life of their nation and hence in the political arena. But the post-World War II years witnessed a growing gulf between poet and polis—a gulf that has continued to widen. In this context, war, or rather anti-war, poetry too easily becomes invective or kitsch—the excoriation of a callous, imperialist Other on the behalf of a sensitive, caring "us." Perhaps only when *Je est un autre*, when the I is the Other as, for example, in the gnomic war poetry of Paul Celan, is the problem resolvable.

The Duncan-Levertov correspondence thus has a special pathos. Both poets produced some brilliant lyric, especially in such early volumes as Levertov's *The Jacob's Ladder*, *O Taste and See*, and *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads*, or in Duncan's *Opening of the Field*, *Bending the Bow*, and *Roots and Branches*. But the poetics of vision and spontaneity, of metamorphosis and dream, could not perform the ethical function the poets began to claim for it. Accordingly, they could only blame each other for their own shortcomings.