The Poet's Essay

Biography and the Poet

(1992)

—Denise Levertov

I WANT TO TALK about the relationship of certain kinds of poems to a current trend in literary biography, and to pose some questions I think readers and writers should be asking about this relationship, its causes and its implications. The kind of biographies I'm thinking of are those which explore and reveal whatever in the subject's life was dubious, scandalous, sensational. Such accounts of the lives of poets are popular, and are read by thousands of people who are not habitual readers of poetry: the skeletons dragged out of the poet's closet (in one case with the collusion of her heirs and psychiatrist) are apparently far more compelling to them than poems, and if they do go on to read the poems too it is often with the same prurient curiosity stimulated by the biography.

Writers of what is called "confessional" poetry—poetry which voluntarily makes public, often in startling, emphatic imagery, experiences and perceptions which once were considered private—are not the only poets whose lives are investigated in this manner, but "confessional" poems do seem to give tacit encouragement in the trend. If the author was willing to disclose intimacies, has not the biographer thereby been given license to do so? This question leads to others, and indicates, I believe, that we need to learn to discriminate better between works of art, which though sometimes openly self-revealing attain aesthetic integrity, and works which, wholly or in part, are manifestations of exhibitionism. (When the latter happen to

concern experiences similar to the reader's own, the distinction may be hard to make, for the content will be undeniably emotive; in readers who have not had analogous experiences, that content may elicit pity or empathic compassion.) Before we look further into this matter, however, let us turn to that of biography.

In considering the nature of biography (and I'll restrict this to biographies of poets, though it obviously applies to others as well) we need to reflect on its function or functions. First, we must suppose the subject's creative opus is of such quality that a biography is called for at all; or else that his or her relation to a movement, to other more important writers, or some similar historical or sociological reason, merits such study. Second, we must ask if the book is intended as a work of reference, in which, by consulting the all-important index and chronology, we can find dates and facts relating to the subject's work. Whether the subject exchanged ideas with X, Y, or Z, or was influenced by them; or at what date a certain poem was composed and whether an earlier version of it exists—information of this kind may expand our understanding of the poems themselves. And third, if the biography is one which attempts, through the use of letters, diaries, interviews, and the biographer's own impressions and opinions, to describe the poet's states of mind, physical presence, personality, medical history, and sexual experiences, we must ask whether this "inside" information, like the "bare facts" of the well-indexed reference book, adds valuably to what we receive from the subject's own creative opus. It is natural that if we enjoy the work, or think it important, we feel some interest in the person who made it. But we know virtually nothing of Shakespeare's life, and that little is held to be unverifiable; would the millions who have been affected by the plays be even more deeply enriched if every episode of his life were to be found documented in some antique hoard of papers? I think not. Yet there are biographies that truly instruct and delight.

An example of an excellent biography which combines two functions is Walter Jackson Bate's *Life of Keats*. Together with all its well-indexed factual data, Bate suggests what less cut-and-dried factors may have entered into the composition of this or that poem; but he refrains from psychologizing for the sake of psychologizing. The work itself is always the central focus of his attention. The people, places, books, conversations, and impressions of Keats' life are discussed because of their bearing on his poems, the raison d'être of the biography, and not in order to satisfy any mere inquisitiveness. In contrast, the biographies I deplore focus on any scandalous or dramatic peculiarities of the poet, and whether they are relevant to the poems as works of art is not seriously questioned.

If biographies like Bate's and others of its caliber constitute personal critiques and tributes without straying into the over-subjective, much less into mere sensationalism and gossip, they are helped in this by the time elapsed since their subjects lived and died. One problem with modern biography is that "lives" get written before their subjects are cold in their graves. (If they go a step further and biographize living persons, authorization or vigorous denial can at least take place!) But with or without a decent interval, there should be a recognition that although our understanding of cultural history is increased by a certain range of factual information, yet all that is most interesting about an artist's life must be in the work itself. There the autobiographical is often completely transformed, or, if undisguisedly recounted, is selected, and invested with a significance which transcends the ephemeral and narrowly personal. When this transcendence does not take place, autobiographical material lacks the resonance we find in poems pervaded by a larger context. Yeats' Maude Gonne is not just Maude Gonne, and the poet is not just Willy Yeats who was in love with her. She is Cathleen Ni Houlihan, she is Ireland herself, and he the Irish people in love with their country. In our own time, Milosz only writes explicitly of his own life-story as much as is

demanded by his major theme, the human intellect and the human soul within the turmoil of twentieth century history. No one could extract a biography from his *Collected Poems*. William Carlos Williams, who so strongly emphasized the virtue of the concrete image and of "finding the universal in the local," was equally discreet and selective in his poems. They come directly out of his experience, yes, yet we can learn from them precious little in the way of biography: that he was a doctor, most of whose patients were poor immigrants; that his wife's name was Floss; that he lived in New Jersey, in sight of the New York skyline across the Hudson—that's about it. Even when, in old age, he obliquely confesses to Floss the infidelities which accompanied his love for her, he does not even verge on making public the physical details of events intrinsically intimate. Biographically speaking, Williams reveals almost as little as Wallace Stevens or T. S. Eliot. As A. N. Wilson wrote in a review of a life of Arthur Ransome, the author of *Swallows and Amazons* and other first-rate children's books, "the money, the illnesses, the marriages . . . are just the chaff which the imagination has discarded." In other words, the lives of poets and other artists are not usually more interesting than anyone else's. Conversely, great novels make us realize that the most uneventful of lives can have deep interest. Those subtle currents of feeling and perception a great writer of fiction can reveal beneath the surface of "ordinary" lives are far more interesting than the scandals and dramas some biographers bring to the fore. If a poet's life is more interesting than his or her poetry, it doesn't say much for the poems. It is in these, if they are good, that one can trace those essential hidden streams of inner life.

Perhaps in the kind of poem from which it seems as if not enough chaff has been discarded, the real problem is not so much a lack of selectivity as an insistent inclusion of material once thought of as private, and which can dominate a poem to the detriment of its intended focus and its artistic integrity.

When this happens, the relation between poet and reader—or *poem* and reader—changes. Just as alcoholism, mental breakdowns, violence, and turbulent sexual histories of celebrities in any field makes them magnets for popular curiosity, so the inclusion in poems of certain kinds of intimate data lays them open to a *prying* kind of reading even before a biographer embarks on any investigation of the author.

There is a restraint in, for instance, the enduringly moving elegies of the past—whether we think, in our own century, of Rexroth's poem to his first wife, Andrée Rexroth, or back to Ben Jonson's farewell to his seven-year-old first-born son, or the *Exequy* of Henry King—a restraint rarely found in more contemporary poems of bereavement. (A notable exception seems to me to be David Ray's *Sam's Book*, because what emerges most strongly from this group of poems is not so much the father's inconsolable grief slowly modulating from initial shock to full integration with his ongoing life—though that is strongly and memorably conveyed—as the vivid spirit of the boy Sam himself, individual, yet archetypal.)

As much as lack of restraint, perhaps what troubles me in many comparable contemporary poems is their egotism. Elegies which are self-centered or excessively confessional often make us feel guilty of unkindness and insensitivity if we dare to think for a moment that the recently dead beloved is, in effect, being exploited. It is not that we doubt the reality of the anguish itself; yet we feel manipulated by its instant and repeated public display. When the protagonists of a particular real-life love-story broken by death are spotlighted in the survivor's poems (which one by one may be beautiful) these poems as a set cannot convey archetypal grief but remain exclusively attached to a specific life-history. The same is true of love poems: a sensuality evoked by anecdotally restricted means is less erotic than that which is less explicit, more stylized, more mysterious.

What motivates poets to give away information which makes them more than normally vulnerable to vulgar curiosity? We

need to couple this question with a similar enquiry into the public appetite for scandal, shock, and any kind of intimate revelation—which in some degree all of us share, as we all breathe the same cultural air. I cannot pretend to unravel the social psychology involved; but I think I see some historical factors that have affected certain poetic practices and their acceptance by readers.

One of these was that during the 1950s or early '60s William Carlos Williams' emphasis on the concrete local particulars of daily life as a poet's vital source quietly began to be diluted and distorted. The result was thousands of banal poems, poems in which a description (possibly of intrinsic interest) of something the writer had seen was prefaced by the entirely superfluous information that he *had* seen it and was on his way to a tavern at the time as he needed a beer. The setting had gobbled up the gemstone, since at least as much time was given to the preface as to the point. Poems of this type became so prevalent that they were accepted as the norm (and they have certainly not disappeared from the scene). This norm, with its gratuitous reiteration of the first person singular, paved the way for the further narcissism which ensued as the confessional school came to the fore. (I should mention here that though Robert Lowell is cited as that school's chief instigator, his own work in the confessional vein is sharply differentiated by his overriding historical sense, which places all that stems from his individual history into a larger objective configuration.) Then, later in the '60s, a number of concepts began to be voiced in American society which, as they filtered slowly into some degree of general acceptance and into the minds of poets too, underwent distortion just as Williams' ideas had done. One of these concepts was encapsulated in the slogan, "Let it all hang out." Whether this expression originated with one of the Beat poets or elsewhere, its primary significance was political, and its aesthetic adoption was a secondary effect, dependent on individual artistic judgment and choice.

As people awoke to the hypocrisy of the state's claim to be defending democracy rather than admitting that the war in Vietnam, like other wars, was being fought for a whole complex of economic and geopolitical reasons, a lot of other hypocrisies came to light at the same time. A whole generation became aware of the disparity between their parents' way of living and their stated values. "Let it all hang out" emerged as a cry for truthfulness, for an end to lying in politics and the whole social fabric; a call to proclaim that the Emperor (in this case, what in those days we called The War Machine, and by extension the social system supporting it) had no clothes of truth and justice. Naturally the arts could not but be affected; however, instead of the ever-greater concern for artistic precision and integrity which should have been the logical translation into creative works of this underlying meaning, the slogan was interpreted as a justification for an aesthetic of exhibitionism.

There is a difference between dragging a skeleton out of a cupboard into daylight and keeping the skeleton on permanent display. The "group grope" (does anyone remember that expression?) may be the opposite of prudery but is not its only alternative. In a D.C. jail after a big demonstration and mass arrest in the early '70s I recall seeing a young woman masturbating in the midst of a crowd of other women. No one made even a whispered comment. That a private act was being made utterly public was apparently considered acceptable—or at least no one dared to remonstrate for fear of being thought puritanical. Modesty was taken for prudery, an attachment to privacy was mistaken for elitism and a lack of open-hearted frankness.

The slogan "the personal is political" came into use around the same time. What this should mean, I think, is that how you act in daily life should reflect your political convictions. For example, it is hypocritical and also ineffective to work for peace and justice if you are belligerent to family and friends. But by

many people it was used as an excuse to retreat from political action of any kind; and to some poets, it seems to have meant that the "particular and local" were enough in themselves without any concern for finding the universal. Of course, it is fatal to go in deliberate search of universality—that way only pomposity lies; yet a poet does need to know and acknowledge a larger frame of reference than his or her own accidental particulars; and without some longing to reach out to such a context, little of poetic substance will result.

Linked to this theme of "the personal is political" is the journal-writing movement of the '70s and '80s, an outgrowth of "human potential," "personal growth," and other holistic programs, and closely associated with feminism though it is not exclusive to women's groups. Keeping a journal or diary can be really valuable to anyone—though one has to beware that one doesn't start to make it the goal of living. But for poets it can create a problem. Journals or diaries are in essence private. Poems, too, deal with intimate experience, but they select and transform it, if they are good poems. Too often, the measure of candor appropriate to a free-standing work of art is superseded by the much larger measure that may serve a cathartic purpose in the psychological development of the diarist, whose pages are to be read by no one but their writer—and perhaps only once by him or her, since the act of writing has itself fulfilled the need. The widespread encouragement of journal-writing and its discussion as an art genre, along with the publication of selections from the journals of living writers, has tended to blur the distinctions between "private" and "public." It seems that some poets lose a sense of where diary ends and poem begins. Journal entries which consist of philosophical or other reflections, record observations of nature, and so forth, are a fascinating kind of informal essay; and from those in which a writer or other artist talks about craft and creative process, or edges up on a work about to begin, there is often much more to be learned than from formal essays. One is grateful to the

author for granting a glimpse into the alchemist's kitchen. But I've seen other published diary excerpts of such a confidential nature that, once again, one questions motivation.

Is there perhaps, in every act of artistic communication, something questionable? We poets are strangely willing to read in public, thus baring our souls with more immediacy than when paper and print intervene, and exposing them, after the reading, to impertinent questions from total strangers. I wonder about this willingness every time I read! The justification, of course, is the belief that one has *made a work*. All makers of art must believe that they are contributing a thing to the sum of things, and that it has some value and a life of its own to live. Without such belief they would not be able to serve the art they practice; however modest, however self-critical, without that grain of faith an artist is paralyzed. But that justification cannot extend to genuine journals. Isn't there something kinky about voluntarily "sharing," as they say, something the very nature of which is destroyed by so doing? A compulsive need, like a Dostoyevsky character, to turn the reader into a voyeur? It is the same phenomenon I have remarked on in regard to some poems. And again, audience compliance involves us all in some measure.

A blurring of the boundary between private and public leads to the gradual loss of the very idea of privacy—a loss which, like the increasing attrition of certain grammatical nuances, and a vocabulary shrinking except in technological words, is a form of erosion affecting the whole human ecology. Television and the development of communications technology are generally, and I think correctly, held responsible for some of this erosion. As everyone knows, extreme violence, actual and fictive, has long since erupted into people's livingrooms, interspersed with advertisements, comedy, and scenes of explicit sexual intercourse, in such a way that all these things run together—equally vivid, equally meaningless. The telephone has intruded into our lives at unwelcome moments for over a

century now. Data banks contain, we are told, all manner of information about us which we were not aware of having imparted to anyone. Marked trails, garbage cans, and garbage (not always in the cans) make a sense of solitude hard to find for those who seek it in what is supposed to be wilderness. One might think privacy and intimacy would be all the more valued in such an environment, but instead their very nature is obscured. When external factors invade what we possess of them, they meet little resistance. How many people, for example, take any steps to prevent telemarketing calls, calls which not only interrupt them at the dinner table or whatever else they happen to be doing, but in which the caller immediately addresses them by their first name?

Yet another factor, deeper than these, is contemporary embarrassment at formalities, at anything recognized as ritual (though unrecognized rituals exist in daily life). This is clear in religious ceremonies, where something parallel to excessive naturalism in the dramatic theater is often substituted for the powerful distancing inherent in the traditional liturgical practices of any religion—practices from which theater itself evolved. Yet there is a deep human need for ritual. Old forms of it, like old prosodic forms, may not accommodate, unchanged, the changing needs of the people, but the new forms that evolve lose their power if they lose the very character of ritual or ceremony, just as new formal explorations in poetry must retain their intrinsically poetic character and not become a form of journalism.

The embarrassment at formality which (along with a lack of imagination) results in unsatisfactory alternatives to rituals that have ceased to be emotionally effective, seems to be related to that same blurring of boundaries. When everything is made personal (as in a priest greeting the people at the beginning of Mass with "Good morning," to which they reply, "Good morning, Father," instead of saying "Peace be with you" and receiving the response, "And with thy spirit"), then the per-

sonal is indistinguishable from the public: the priest is greeted as an individual, and this obscures the nature of his office as priest, which transcends the personal. In the same way, a certain distancing which the great poets of the past demonstrate—the assumption of the bard's mantle, like the vestments of the priest—has been forgone in our time, less for the sake of relevancy than out of some feeling that ceremony is absurd (as indeed it can be when it is undertaken self-consciously and without conviction).

The publication of poems which like diaries (though sometimes with an undeniable beauty or force of language) present unmediated, untransformed, accounts of the most intimate experience, represent a kind of self-invasion. And one of the most troubling aspects of this is its disregard for others.

> My love's manners in bed
> are not to be discussed by me

wrote Robert Creeley in 1959. I've read many a poem that made me feel the author would have done well to profit by this maxim. But adults can object and defend themselves if they feel exposed and exploited as characters in someone's drama of self-revelation; children can not. Yet there are many poems in which a parent—and I have to acknowledge that, in my observation, it is most often a mother—writes of a child in ways liable to cause acute, even traumatic embarrassment when that child sooner or later reads that poem. These are poems—or images in poems—which focus on the child's body, and in particular its genitalia. Imagine a shy adolescent finding in print a graphic description of his little penis at age five, its color and shape! Worse, imagine his schoolmates reading the poem and teasing him about it! Was the description vital to the poem? Often, I would say it was not. But in some instances it may be. In that case, the writer should have recognized, I think, that though tone and intent were tender, the poem

should remain unpublished—at least until the child is an adult and his consent can be requested.*

It is important to note a type of autobiographical poem which does not partake of the gratuitous and self-important, but which brings to light acts of oppression and cruelty. Victims of racism, rape, torture, incest, and other abuses and crimes who dare to tell their stories speak for others who have been stifled and silenced by their own sufferings and who too often have felt, in some confused way, complicit. Some degree of liberation may come to them in knowing that they are not unique in what happened to them. Whether a more general knowledge of, for example, child abuse, actually helps to make a society less prone to it I doubt, however; it almost seems, depressingly, as if the more instances that are uncovered the more it proliferates. This seems true of rape also. But this can only be a matter of conjecture, whereas the breaking of silence in such instances is of clear personal benefit, and if it results in poems of high integrity these should, of course, be published.

Highly evolved, compassionate individuals who have come to perceive, over time, the oppressions in the lives of their own oppressors (which, in some instances, were the cause of their warping) and who have seen remorse, growth, and change take place in such individuals, will still face an ethical dilemma in deciding whether to publish poems which retrospectively explore past misdeeds. But the right decision might be to set aside these scruples, for such objective revelations, unlike the work of narcissistic poets who exploit themselves and their intimates, are not exclusively self-serving although they may free their authors from the paralysis of shame and concealment.

The principle of consideration for the privacy of others could of course be carried to absurdity, and prevent the publication of virtually everything; its application calls for common sense

*A friend pointed out to me that such poems manifest the all too common unconscious assumption among parents that their children "belong" to them, like extensions of their own bodies.

as well as sensitivity. But a corrective is certainly needed—not from without, in the form of censorship, but from within the poet as a scrupulous avoidance of exploitively or hurtfully utilizing the lives of others: a form of *self*-censorship exercised with a balance of aesthetic and ethical awareness.

This leads one to ask, if catharsis is one of the functions of art, can it co-exist with such compunction? It's a serious question. But one has to follow it with another: catharsis for whom? For the writer, the writing has already provided it, and publication is inessential. For the reader, what is cathartic is not necessarily what was so for the writer; and cannot catharsis for the reader happen except at the expense of the writer's intimates? Is loss of intimacy for the writer the sacrifice without which no redemption can occur? Nothing in the Greek dramatists, whose work first consciously attempted that "purification by pity and fear," leads one to suppose so, nor is there later evidence of such a necessity.

If poets and readers undertook to ponder these questions it might, perhaps, have an effect on the market for sensational biography. The poet's own idea of what constitutes a "Life" may have to change before the biographies do. How different in its assumptions from those of our time is the bare list of facts, more of them about his brother than himself, with which the seventeenth-century poet Henry Vaughan modestly, albeit with eager courtesy replied to John Aubrey's request for particulars of his life! How that modesty contrasts with the egotism of writers who assume the reader wants to know that they have smelly feet or that a sibling once deliberately pissed on them . . . .

Iris Origo, the admirable historian, wrote that the two great virtues of the biographer are enthusiasm and veracity, and that three "insidious temptations . . . assail" him or her: "to suppress, to invent, or to sit in judgement." But she speaks also, in the same essay on the art of biography, of "a new age of journalism, which is too curious about the great" and which Henry

James described as emanating from "the cunning and ferocity of . . . inquisitive hunters whose quarry is all that calls for privacy and silence." Origo's own work demonstrates how a biographer, like a poet, can maintain veracity and avoid the suppression which would falsify, yet can judiciously discard chaff, just as a poet must (though much of what is chaff to poems is vital grain to biography, e.g., historical minutiae of genuine relevance).

Proust's criticism of "the method of Sainte Beuve" was essentially that the information it collected did not throw light on an author's work but was concerned with the irrelevant. An argument can be made for the relevancy of much biographical information, but not for all of it. As long as poets publish with a disregard for their own and other's privacy, they contribute to the trashing of that very realm of inwardness which is the source of their art. The deepest communication, the lasting communion of which poetry is capable, always flows from that inner center outward to meet the other inward depth that receives it. I will close with a quotation that beautifully articulates that reality: "The reason for this correcting and rewriting was his search for strength and exactness of expression," Pasternak wrote, in Dr. Zhivago:

> but it also corresponded to the promptings of an inward reticence which forbade him to expose his personal experiences and the real events of his past with too much freedom, lest he should offend or wound those who had directly taken part in them. As a result, the steaming and pulsing of his feelings was gradually driven out of his poems, and so far from their becoming morbid and devitalized, there appeared in them a broad peace and reconciliation which lifted the particular to the level of the universal, accessible to all.

The Earthwoman and the Waterwoman

The earthwoman by her oven
tends her cakes of good grain.
The waterwoman's children
are spindle thin.
The earthwoman
has oaktree arms. Her children
full of blood and milk
stamp through the woods shouting.
The waterwoman
sings gay songs in a sad voice
with her moonshine children.
When the earthwoman
has had her fill of the good day
she curls to sleep in her warm hut
a dark fruitcake sleep
but the waterwoman
goes dancing in the misty lit-up town
in dragonfly dresses and blue shoes.

The Marriage

You have my
attention: which is
a tenderness, beyond
what I may say. And I have
your constancy to
something beyond myself.
The force
of your commitment charges us—we live
in the sweep of it, taking courage
one from the other.

The Marriage (II)

I want to speak to you.
To whom else should I speak?
It is you who make
a world to speak of.
In your warmth the
fruits ripen—all the
apples and pears that grow
on the south wall of my
head. If you listen
it rains for them, then
they drink. If you
speak in response
the seeds
jump into the ground.
Speak or be silent: your silence
will speak to me.

Laying the Dust

What a sweet smell rises
when you lay the dust—
bucket after bucket of water thrown
on the yellow grass.
The water
flashes
each time you
make it leap—
arching its glittering back.
The sound of
more water
pouring into the pail
almost quenches my thirst.
Surely when flowers
grow here, they'll not
smell sweeter than this
wet ground, suddenly black.

Everything that Acts Is Actual

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

Overland to the Islands

Let's go—much as that dog goes,
intently haphazard. The
Mexican light on a day that
'smells like autumn in Connecticut'
makes iris ripples on his
black gleaming fur—and that too
is as one would desire—a radiance
consorting with the dance.
Under his feet
rocks and mud, his imagination, sniffing,
engaged in its perceptions—dancing
edgeways, there's nothing
the dog disdains on his way,
nevertheless he
keeps moving, changing
pace and approach but
not direction—'every step an arrival.'

The Instant

'We'll go out before breakfast, and get
some mushrooms,' says my mother.

Early, early: the sun
risen, but hidden in mist

the square house left behind
sleeping, filled with sleepers;

up the dewy hill, quietly, with baskets.

Mushrooms firm, cold;
tussocks of dark grass, gleam of webs,
turf soft and cropped. Quiet and early. And no valley,

no hills: clouds about our knees, tendrils
of cloud in our hair. Wet scrags
of wool caught in barbed wire, gorse
looming, without scent.
Then ah! suddenly
the lifting of it, the mist rolls
quickly away, and far, far—

'Look!' she grips me, 'It is
Eryri!
It's Snowdon, fifty
miles away!'—the voice
a wave rising to Eryri,
falling.
Snowdon, home
of eagles, resting place of
Merlin, core of Wales.

Light
graces the mountainhead
for a lifetime's look, before the mist
draws in again.

Illustrious Ancestors

The Rav
of Northern White Russia declined,
in his youth, to learn the
language of birds, because
the extraneous did not interest him; nevertheless
when he grew old it was found
he understood them anyway, having
listened well, and as it is said, 'prayed
with the bench and the floor.' He used
what was at hand—as did

Angel Jones of Mold, whose meditations
were sewn into coats and britches.
Well, I would like to make,
thinking some line still taut between me and them,
poems direct as what the birds said,
hard as a floor, sound as a bench,
mysterious as the silence when the tailor
would pause with his needle in the air.

Action

I can lay down that history
I can lay down my glasses
I can lay down the imaginary lists
of what to forget and what must be
done. I can shake the sun
out of my eyes and lay everything down
on the hot sand, and cross
the whispering threshold and walk
right into the clear sea, and float there,
my long hair floating, and fishes
vanishing all around me. Deep water.
Little by little one comes to know
the limits and depths of power.

The Tulips

Red tulips
living into their death
flushed with a wild blue

tulips
becoming wings
ears of the wind
jackrabbits rolling their eyes

west wind
shaking the loose pane

some petals fall
with that sound one
listens for

During the Eichmann Trial

i When We Look Up

When we look up
each from his being
Robert Duncan

He had not looked,
pitiful man whom none

pity, whom all
must pity if they look

into their own face (given
only by glass, steel, water

barely known) all
who look up

to see—how many
faces? How many

seen in a lifetime? (Not those
that flash by, but those

into which the gaze wanders
and is lost

and returns to tell
Here is a mystery,

a person, an
other, an I?

Count them.
Who are five million?)

'I was used from the nursery
to obedience

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.

I was the first to see him, for I grew
out on the pasture slope, beyond the forest.
He was a man, it seemed: the two
moving stems, the short trunk, the two
arm-branches, flexible, each with five leafless
twigs at their ends,
and the head that's crowned by brown or gold grass,
bearing a face not like the beaked face of a bird,
more like a flower's.
He carried a burden made of
some cut branch bent while it was green,
strands of a vine tight-stretched across it. From this,
when he touched it, and from his voice
which unlike the wind's voice had no need of our
leaves and branches to complete its sound,
came the ripple.
But it was now no longer a ripple (he had come near and
stopped in my first shadow) it was a wave that bathed me
as if rain
rose from below and around me
instead of falling.
And what I felt was no longer a dry tingling:

I seemed to be singing as he sang, I seemed to know
what the lark knows; all my sap
was mounting towards the sun that by now
had risen, the mist was rising, the grass
was drying, yet my roots felt music moisten them
deep under earth.

He came still closer, leaned on my trunk:
the bark thrilled like a leaf still-folded.
Music! There was no twig of me not
trembling with joy and fear.

Then as he sang
it was no longer sounds only that made the music:
he spoke, and as no tree listens I listened, and language
came into my roots
out of the earth,
into my bark
out of the air,
into the pores of my greenest shoots
gently as dew
and there was no word he sang but I knew its meaning.
He told of journeys,
of where sun and moon go while we stand in dark,
of an earth-journey he dreamed he would take some day
deeper than roots . . .
He told of the dreams of man, wars, passions, griefs,
and I, a tree, understood words—ah, it seemed
my thick bark would split like a sapling's that
grew too fast in the spring
when a late frost wounds it.

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.

And at the heart of my wood
(so close I was to becoming man or a god)
there was a kind of silence, a kind of sickness,
something akin to what men call boredom,
something
(the poem descended a scale, a stream over stones)
that gives to a candle a coldness
in the midst of its burning, he said.

It was then,
when in the blaze of his power that
reached me and changed me
I thought I should fall my length,
that the singer began
to leave me. Slowly
moved from my noon shadow
to open light,
words leaping and dancing over his shoulders
back to me
rivery sweep of lyre-tones becoming
slowly again
ripple.

And I
in terror
but not in doubt of
what I must do
in anguish, in haste,
wrenched from the earth root after root,
the soil heaving and cracking, the moss tearing asunder—
and behind me the others: my brothers
forgotten since dawn. In the forest
they too had heard,

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and were pulling their roots in pain
out of a thousand years' layers of dead leaves,
rolling the rocks away,
breaking themselves
out of
their depths.
You would have thought we would lose the sound of the lyre,
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.

Clumsily,
stumbling over our own roots,
rustling our leaves
in answer,
we moved, we followed.

All day we followed, up hill and down.
We learned to dance,
for he would stop, where the ground was flat,
and words he said
taught us to leap and to wind in and out
around one another in figures the lyre's measure designed.
The singer
laughed till he wept to see us, he was so glad.
At sunset
we came to this place I stand in, this knoll
with its ancient grove that was bare grass then.
In the last light of that day his song became
farewell.
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.
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!

Advent 1966

Because in Vietnam the vision of a Burning Babe
is multiplied, multiplied,
the flesh on fire
not Christ's, as Southwell saw it, prefiguring
the Passion upon the Eve of Christmas,

but wholly human and repeated, repeated,
infant after infant, their names forgotten,
their sex unknown in the ashes,
set alight, flaming but not vanishing,
not vanishing as his vision but lingering,

cinders upon the earth or living on
moaning and stinking in hospitals three abed;

because of this my strong sight,
my clear caressive sight, my poet's sight I was given
that it might stir me to song,
is blurred.
There is a cataract filming over
my inner eyes. Or else a monstrous insect
has entered my head, and looks out
from my sockets with multiple vision,

seeing not the unique Holy Infant
burning sublimely, an imagination of redemption,
furnace in which souls are wrought into new life,
but, as off a beltline, more, more senseless figures aflame.

And this insect (who is not there—
it is my own eyes do my seeing, the insect
is not there, what I see is there)
will not permit me to look elsewhere,

or if I look, to see except dulled and unfocused
the delicate, firm, whole flesh of the still unburned.

in other
happenings. And for
wanting to know it,
for

assuming there is
such a secret, yes,
for that
most of all.

September 1961

This is the year the old ones,
the old great ones
leave us alone on the road.

The road leads to the sea.
We have the words in our pockets,
obscure directions. The old ones

have taken away the light of their presence,
we see it moving away over a hill
off to one side.

They are not dying,
they are withdrawn
into a painful privacy

learning to live without words.
E.P. "It looks like dying"—Williams: "I can't
describe to you what has been

happening to me"—
H.D. "unable to speak."
The darkness

twists itself in the wind, the stars
are small, the horizon
ringed with confused urban light-haze.

They have told us
the road leads to the sea,
and given

the language into our hands.
We hear
our footsteps each time a truck

has dazzled past us and gone
leaving us new silence.
One can't reach

the sea on this endless
road to the sea unless
one turns aside at the end, it seems,

follows
the owl that silently glides above it
aslant, back and forth,

and away into deep woods.

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 go, sometimes

we think the night wind carries
a smell of the sea. . .

is a metaphor only if I
force him to be one,
looking too long in his pale, fond,
dilating, contracting eyes

that reject mirrors, refuse
to observe what bides
stockstill.
Likewise

flex and reflex of claws
gently pricking through sweater to skin
gently sustains their own tune,
not mine. I-Thou, cat, I-Thou.

Living

The fire in leaf and grass
so green it seems
each summer the last summer.

The wind blowing, the leaves
shivering in the sun,
each day the last day.

A red salamander
so cold and so
easy to catch, dreamily

moves his delicate feet
and long tail. I hold
my hand open for him to go.

Each minute the last minute.

A Lamentation

Grief, have I denied thee?
Grief, I have denied thee.

That robe or tunic, black gauze
over black and silver my sister wore
to dance *Sorrow*, hung so long
in my closet. I never tried it on.
And my dance
was *Summer*—they rouged my cheeks
and twisted roses with wire stems into my hair.
I was compliant, Juno de sept ans,
betraying my autumn birthright pour faire plaisir.
Always denial. Grief in the morning, washed away
in coffee, crumbled to a dozen errands between
busy fingers.

Or across cloistral shadow, insistent
intrusion of pink sunstripes from open
archways, falling recurrent.

Corrosion denied, the figures the acid designs
filled in. Grief dismissed,
and Eros along with grief.
Phantasmagoria swept across the sky
by shaky winds endlessly,
the spaces of blue timidly steady—
blue curtains at trailer windows framing
the cinder walks.
There are hidden corners of sky
choked with the swept shreds, with pain and ashes.
Grief,
have I denied thee? Denied thee.
The emblems torn from the walls,
and the black plumes.

3 a.m., September 1, 1969

for Kenneth Rexroth

Warm wind, the leaves
rustling without dryness,
hills dissolved into silver.

It could be any age,
four hundred years ago or a time
of post-revolutionary peace,
the rivers clean again, birth rate and crops
somehow in balance . . .

In heavy dew
under the moon the blond grasses
lean in swathes on the field slope. Fervently
the crickets practice their religion of ecstasy.

The Wanderer

The chameleon who wistfully
thought it could not suffer
nostalgia

now on a vast sheet of clear glass
cowers, and prays for vision
of russet bark and trembling foliage.

The Old King

for Jim Forest

The Soul's dark Cottage, batter'd and decay'd,
Lets in new Light through chinks that Time hath made.

And at night—
the whole night a cavern, the world
an abyss—

lit from within:

a red glow
throbbing at the chinks.

Far-off a wanderer
unhoused, unhouseled,
wonders to see
hearthblaze:
fears, and takes heart.

To stay perhaps,

one throat far-off
pulsing to venture
one note from its feathers,
one bell,

on into dewfall, into
peculiar silence.

The multitude gone, labyrinths
crumbling.
To go down
back into the known hole.

Candles in Babylon

Through the midnight streets of Babylon
between the steel towers of their arsenals,
between the torture castles with no windows,
we race by barefoot, holding tight
our candles, trying to shield
the shivering flames, crying
'Sleepers Awake!'
hoping
the rhyme's promise was true,
that we may return
from this place of terror
home to a calm dawn and
the work we had just begun.

Williams: An Essay

His theme
over and over:

the twang of plucked
catgut
from which struggles
music,

the tufted swampgrass
quicksilvering
dank meadows,

a baby's resolute fury–metaphysic
of appetite and tension.

Not
the bald image, but always–
undulant, elusive, beyond reach
of any dull
staring eye–lodged

among the words, beneath
the skin of image: nerves,

muscles, rivers
of urgent blood, a mind

secret, disciplined, generous and
unfathomable.
Over

and over,
his theme
hid itself and
smilingly reappeared.

He loved
persistence–but it must
be linked to invention: landing
backwards, 'facing
into the wind's teeth,'
to please him.

He loved
the lotus cup, fragrant
upon the swaying water, loved

the wily mud
pressing swart riches into its roots,

and the long stem of connection.

Surely our river
cannot already be hastening
into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot
drag, in the silt,
all that is innocent?
Not yet, not yet–
there is too much broken
that must be mended,

too much hurt we have done to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,

so much is in bud.

Concurrence

Each day's terror, almost
a form of boredom–madmen
at the wheel and
stepping on the gas and
the brakes no good–
and each day one,
sometimes two, morning-glories,
faultless, blue, blue sometimes
flecked with magenta, each
lit from within with
the first sunlight.

She and the Muse

Away he goes, the hour's delightful hero,
arrivederci: and his horse clatters
out of the courtyard, raising
a flurry of straw and scattering hens.

He turns in the saddle waving a plumed hat,
his saddlebags are filled with talismans,
mirrors, parchment histories, gifts and stones,
indecipherable clues to destiny.

He rides off in the dustcloud of his own
story, and when he has vanished she
who had stood firm to wave and watch
from the top step, goes in to the cool

flagstoned kitchen, clears honey and milk and bread
off the table, sweeps from the hearth
ashes of last night's fire, and climbs the stairs
to strip tumbled sheets from her wide bed.

Now the long-desired
visit is over. The heroine
is a scribe. Returned to solitude,
eagerly she re-enters the third room,

the room hung with tapestries, scenes that change
whenever she looks away. Here is her lectern,
here her writing desk. She picks a quill,
dips it, begins to write. But not of him.

there life was, and abundantly; it touched
your dullest task, and the task was easy.
Joyful, absorbed,
you 'practiced the presence of God' as a musician
practices hour after hour his art:
'A stone before the carver,'
you 'entered into yourself.'

Pentimento

To be discerned
only by those
alert to likelihood—

the mountain's form
beneath the milky radiance
which revokes it.

It lingers—
a draft
the artist may return to.

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 transparence
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,

It was the way
as they climbed the steps
they appeared bit by bit
yet swiftly—
the tops of their hats
then their faces
looking in as they reached
the top step by the door, then
as I flung the door open
their dear corporeal selves,
first him, then her. It was
the simultaneously
swift and gradual advent
of such mercy after
I had been wounded.
It was the little familiar
net attached to her hat,
it was especially
the thick soft cloth of his black
clerical overcoat,
and their short stature
and their complete
comforting embrace,
the long-dead
visiting time from eternity.

"I've always written rather directly about my life, my concerns at any particular time."

Denise Levertov's life (1923–1997) spans nearly three quarters of the most violent century in recorded history. She lived through the aftermath of the First World War, the world-wide Depression, the rise of the mass movements of fascism and communism, the Second World War, the Atomic Age, neo-colonialism, the Korean, Vietnam and Gulf Wars, as well as countless smaller and regional wars. The framework of the peace, anti-nuclear and ecology movements, within which she lived her private and inner life appears as background and sometimes foreground in her poetry. All her life, she wrote out of her family: as daughter of older parents, as younger sister, later as wife and mother. She wrote as friend and lover, as social activist. She wrote from her life as outsider, pilgrim and wanderer, as a transplant never fully at home, as an "airplant" rather than a rooted one.

> Among Jews a Goy, among Gentiles (secular or Christian) a Jew or at least half Jew (which was good or bad according to their degree of anti-semitism), among Anglo-Saxons a Celt, in Wales a Londoner who not only did not speak Welsh, but was not imbued with Welsh attitudes; among school children a strange exception whom they did not know whether to envy or mistrust—all of these anomalies predicted my later experience: I so often feel English, or perhaps European, in the United States, while in England I sometimes feel American …[1]

She was born in Ilford, Essex, near London, to a Welsh Congregationalist mother and a father who was Russian, a Hasidic Jew who had become a Christian and an Anglican priest. She and Olga, nine years her elder, were educated at home, in an atmosphere both intensely intellectual and deeply spiritual, at once cosmopolitan and tightly inward and enclosed. Both parents were scholarly. Her father wrote extensively on Jewish