

4-2024

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Jeremiah Veldhuyzen

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Jeremiah Veldhuyzen

Professor Engel

English 275 W01

1 April 2024

Denise Levertov and Changing for God's Presence

For Denise Levertov, poetry is to be used as a means of bringing someone closer to God. In Mark Jarman's article of "Religious Poems", he says "But 'The Secret' from Denise Levertov's 1964 book *O Taste and See* reminds me that, for many, poetry is where 'the secret of life' may be found" (Jarman par. 4). In other words, Levertov uses her poetry to help those who have struggled to be willing to see a part of themselves that needs to change. As a Christian, female poet who used to be an Agnostic, Levertov uses this kind of spiritual poetry to help keep the minds of both herself and her readers on God. Using poetry as a means of conveying her message, Levertov uses spiritual terms in "The Avowal," "Flickering Mind," and "To Live in the Mercy of God" to emphasize the theme of faith by providing reasons for each person to be willing to open up and have every little part of the world remind themselves of God and his nature, exposing how often people forget to appreciate what God has made and have taken it for granted.

According to Joyce Lorraine Beck, Denise Levertov's *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* showcases a moment in life such as that of Levertov in which people have a vision of the secret to reaching their goal, but in an instant, the mind takes them elsewhere (Beck 45). Similarly, there are many people out there who will get distracted by worldly materials and are unable to focus on the plans that God has for their lives. Through some of the writings of Levertov, there is certain knowledge as to how imagination through meditation can allow

someone to find a joyful experience or understanding in something or someone that cannot be physically seen, but does exist (Lake 474-483). Occasionally someone may feel God's presence around them, maybe when they pray, sing, or even just thinking about God and his glory. Spiritual poets like Levertov encourage communicating with God through the Bible. By the analysis of some critics such as Edward Zlotkowski, the beauty found in nature played an inspirational role in Levertov's conversion to Christianity (Gallant par. 9). A lot of Levertov's poetry is about nature and that is likely because of how God's creation makes Levertov feel at peace in a fallen world. Levertov's feelings of doubt toward her faith is well represented in her poem the "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus" (Gallant par. 13). She has the struggle that if there is a God out there, then why do bad things happen in the world to those who are innocent (Gallant par. 14). This is an unfortunate case in which people think they know better than God and so blame him for the sins of humans. In an analysis by David Shaddock, Levertov discusses how people tend to want to argue with God, but are unwilling to have any room for faith in their lives (Shaddock 158). Some consider faith a weak concept, but do not understand the amount of attention that is required. In the case of Levertov, she is considered to believe and have faith in God as something she must have to inspire all of her expressions whether they are political or artistic (Shaddock 158). Levertov later in her life concludes that the enemy in life is not God, but rather the false convictions and delusions that are produced by others and oneself (Shaddock 159). This often happens when there is an acceptance that it is not possible to have complete knowledge of the power of God (Shaddock 158). There clearly had to be a beginning to these moral understandings of the world due to the events and situations in Levertov's life. In addition to all of these religious undertones in her poetry, the historical context of Levertov greatly impacted their spark in her work.

Much of the religious journey of Denise Levertov is considered to have started when her father, a Christian Russian Jew, became an Anglican minister and taught his girls in the ways of religious training (“Denise” par. 2). Very likely due to the amount of fictional literature and poetry read to her by her mother, Levertov became courageous in her ability to craft poetry (“Denise” par. 2-3). Poetry would become a valuable tool for Levertov’s implementation of Christian undertones later in her life. Despite disagreements with aspects of Catholicism, Levertov stayed within the church until her death (Staff par. 3). These disagreements may be a part of why Levertov wrote a poem against the idea of earning grace. To really dive deeper into her poetic life, a dissection of at least three of Levertov’s poems is needed in order to show the Christian undertones present in her work. The first poem is “The Avowal.”

The poem “The Avowal” is considered to be a representation of Denise Levertov and her conversion from Agnostic to Christianity. The speaker in this poem is inspired by the joy and comfort that is brought by God when living in his embrace while she is on earth and until she is taken to heaven. That kind of change would take time learning about God: “so would I learn to attain / freefall, and float / into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace, / knowing no effort earns / that all-surrounding grace” (lines 6-10). This change in the heart of the speaker is followed with the understanding that works do not lead to salvation. It is only through God’s grace and the sacrifice he made that people are saved and not because of who they are or what they have done. This newfound faith found in people like the speaker does not necessarily make life easier, but can often come with its own struggles. The next poem called “Flickering Mind” showcases some of these struggles.

In the poem “Flickering Mind,” there is much emphasis that is put on relatable feelings when believing in God. There will always be people out there who will blame their mistakes on

God or will feel like God is not present anywhere. This poem addresses how those forms of bitterness that people have often are of their own doing because they let those feelings affect them. What the speaker says about God is that “You the unchanging presence, in whom all / moves and changes” (lines 27-28). The speaker is expressing God’s omnipresence. Oftentimes it is a case where the person needs to dedicate to being closer or needs to keep believing even when they don’t feel close to God: “Lord, not you / it is I who am absent. / At first / belief was a joy I kept in secret” (lines 1-4). The speaker is pointing out how keeping faith in God without sharing it to others will only be harmful in a journey of being closer to God. It is often at that time when it feels like God is not really there, that those feelings should be shared with others. Sometimes it is more important to think about God and his glory shown in nature, but when someone stops thinking about God and their mind wanders elsewhere, it is at that time that it is not God who is absent, but it is the person who stops taking time to spend thinking about or praising God for creation or for what God has done for mankind who is absent. This inability to keep focus on God is represented: “I stop / to think about you, and my mind / at once / like a minnow darts away, / darts / into the shadows, into gleams that fret / unceasing over / the river's purling and passing. / Not for one second / will my self hold still, but wanders / anywhere, / everywhere it can turn.” (lines 12-23). The speaker here is detailing the universal struggle of keeping the mind on the things above and not on worldly things. It may be easy to forget about what glorifies God and to focus too heavily on man-made materials or ideas. Understanding of how the creation of the world is intricately designed and how human beings are to live their lives as the sub-creators is shed some light on in the final poem titled “To Live in the Mercy of God.”

The poem “To Live in the Mercy of God” details Denise Levertov’s praise for God’s creation known as nature. The speaker thinks about the awe of the nature of God, but at first in

an aspect that doesn't bring her comfort: "To live in the mercy of God. The complete / sentence too adequate, has no give. / Awe, not comfort. Stone, elbows of / stony wood beneath lenient / moss bed" (lines 6-10). The speaker thinks of a rough surface which brings her discomfort, but as the speaker keeps her mind on God's nature, she becomes overwhelmed by awe as she begins to feel comfort in other parts of nature: "And awe suddenly / passing beyond itself. Becomes / a form of comfort. / Becomes the steady / air you glide on, arms / stretched like the wings of flying foxes. / To hear the multiple silence / of trees, the rainy / forest depths of their listening" (lines 11-19). The speaker is trying to convey God's mercy toward humans and the rest of the inhabitants of the earth because of God's creation of a world that is well-designed and safe to live in and not a world that is too dangerous or devoid of life to make a living. The awe and wonder of God's creation becomes a comfort to the speaker. Life in the world could have been made much harder, but God instead made a world that used logic and science in a way to show his glory in front of humans and all the other living creatures. This is due to God's incredible love for his creation: "Thus, not mild, not temperate, / God's love for the world. Vast / flood of mercy / flung on resistance" (lines 40-43). This is meant to be a reminder that even though living in the world may be difficult, it is God's mercy in disguise that survival is still possible in this world. That is something that nobody should be taking for granted and so cannot be making excuses in order to be bitter toward God. In that way, Levertov is conveying how one should use their own talents and abilities with the glory of God always in mind just like how God used creation to show human beings his glory. Ultimately, "To Live in the Mercy of God" along with the poems "The Avowal" and "Flickering Mind" declare inspiring information about the presence of God, but a clear connection toward faith benefits these three poems with an overview of Levertov and her works.

Throughout her poetry, specifically “The Avowal,” “Flickering Mind,” and “To Live in the Mercy of God,” Denise Levertov is dedicated to revealing the nature of God to her readers and exploring the hardships that they may face with their faith. Her desire for change in the hearts of her readers is present in her testimony of turning away from Agnosticism and not shying away from what it is like being a person of faith. She succeeds in this by dismissing disdain toward God and instead shining a light on how people can change the way they act or feel when discovering God in their lives as a transformational process. In another poem, “In Whom We Move and Live and Have Our Being” Levertov reminds her readers about the misfortune that comes with the discomfort that a lot of people have being associated with Christians: “leaves astir, our wings / rising, ruffled -- but only the saints / take flight. We cower / in cliff-crevice or edge out gingerly / on branches close to the nest. The wind / marks the passage of holy ones riding / that ocean of air. Slowly their wake / reaches us, rocks us” (lines 7-14). Levertov’s outstanding testimonies through her spiritual poems assert a powerful message that challenges readers of today to take up the mantle of faith so that they may better understand the meaning of life and how to react to its continuous hardships.

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