

LEVERTOV'S POETICS

OF

ORGANIC FORM

Charlotte Hussey

A Thesis in

The Department of English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April, 1979

© Charlotte Hussey, 1979

ABSTRACT

LEVERTOV'S POETICS OF ORGANIC FORM

Charlotte Hussey

Organicism is a key word to the understanding of Denise Levertov's poetry and poetics. In The Poet in the World, her collection of critical essays, she uses organicism to explain the artistic process and the resultant work of art or "organic form". Thus, this dissertation will explore and evaluate Levertov's poetics of organic form as it relates to her own poetry. It will be limited to the poetry written from 1946, when she published her first book, to 1971. Although Levertov continues to be a prolific writer, the above period offers a broad sampling of her work.

Her poetics of organic form is largely derivative in that it draws its vocabulary from Romantic, Victorian, and early twentieth century poetics and from late nineteenth and early twentieth century science and psychology. This thesis will acknowledge her predecessors when it is necessary. And, it will attempt to show how successful Levertov is in integrating these influences into a significant and contemporary poetics of her own.

To My Mother and Father

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Abbreviations of the titles of Denise Levertov's

books	page ii
Introduction	1
Chapter I. The Seminal, Organic Event	4
Chapter II. The Process of Poetry	24
Chapter III. The Innate Growth of Organic Form	43
Chapter IV. The Work of Art as an Organic Whole	60
I. Immigrating from Europe's "Wasteland" to America and "That Crazy Bird"	60
II. William Carlos Williams and "The Crude Substances of Dailiness"	65
III. "Those Who Dare" Open the Form	86
Conclusion	100
Selected Bibliography	109

The abbreviations of the titles of Denise Levertov's books, as they appear in this thesis, are as follows:

DI	<u>The Double Image</u>
FP	<u>Footprints</u>
FD	<u>The Freeing of the Dust</u>
H&N	<u>Here and Now</u>
JL	<u>The Jacob's Ladder</u>
OT&S	<u>O Taste and See</u>
OI	<u>Overland to the Islands</u>
PIW	<u>The Poet in the World</u>
RA	<u>Relearning the Alphabet</u>
SD	<u>The Sorrow Dance</u>
TSA	<u>To Stay Alive</u>
WEBJ	<u>With Eyes in the Back of Our Heads</u>

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an introductory exploration of Denise Levertov's use of the organism as a literary metaphor. It will explore how she compares works of art to living things and, more important, how she has developed the organic metaphor into a theory of art or organicism, which she calls a poetics of "organic form" (PIW, 7).

Organicism is a literary theory that has existed, in some form, since Plato and Aristotle's time.¹ Levertov's statements on poetics work out from quotations from such influential and varied organicists as Gerard Manley Hopkins, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William Carlos Williams. These writers have been discussed in this thesis not for their own sake but to illuminate and enhance the reader's understanding of Levertov's organicism. Citations have also been taken from secondary sources to illustrate that her poetics of organic form is a highly derivative theory.

As Levertov describes a lyric poem, it has two properties analogous to those of an organism -- its growth and its integration into an indivisible whole. These two properties, applied to poetry, become the organizing principles for her poetics, forming its categories of progressive and ideal organicism. The progressive category consists of descriptions of the development of organic form, called "the process of poetry" (PIW, 7)

¹M.H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 184-185.

analogous to the growth of living things. The aim of process is to realize the category of ideal organicism, the perfection of the organic form into a "total form" (PIW, 10) which has the complex, integrated wholeness of living organisms.

The four chapters of this thesis are structured according to these two categories: progressive organicism (Chapters II and III); and ideal organicism (Chapters I and IV). Appearing in the following order, these chapters will also be based on four fundamental concepts developed from the organic metaphor that governs Levertov's notion of organic form:

- I Organic form originates from a seminal, holistic event, as a plant originates from a seed.
- II Organic form is the result of a growth process, as is a plant or living thing.
- III Organic form's growth, like that of any organism's, is innate and self-organizing.
- IV Organic form, in its achieved structure, possesses a unity that is analogous to the integrated wholeness of a plant or living thing.

Organicism, as a theory of art, attempts to account for an inseparable and rationally incomprehensible whole, and a result is that the categories of progressive and ideal organicism overlap in the idea of the whole. Process, then, cannot be completely separated from its product, the work of art. This implied integration of the categories of progressive and ideal organicism has made their division into the separate chapters of this thesis appear somewhat artificial. Levertov has had

trouble describing a process that is inseparable from its product and in general had difficulty breaking down certain concepts into neat parcels, as will appear with the notions of inscape and instress or those of form and content.

Perhaps these structural problems are inherent in the limitations of the organic metaphor. As metaphor, it does not emphasize a structure that can be logically analyzed or dissected but one that can simply be experienced as an integrated and intuitive whole. This emphasis, taken to extremes, can result in obscure mysticism and anti-intellectualism. It must be remembered, then, that the organic metaphor, in its comparison of art to living things, can only be taken so far. What it cannot do is explain away the basic difference between art and life -- that art is, in part, a product of human will and conscious, even intellectual effort, whereas the natural world is not. But what the organic metaphor does help us remember is that a critical appreciation of a work of art is limited and that "analysis, though indispensable, is not enough."²

²Richard Harter Fogle, The Idea of Coleridge's Criticism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), p. 10.

CHAPTER I

THE SEMINAL, ORGANIC EVENT

In her collection of essays, The Poet in the World, Denise Levertov writes that organic form begins as a seminal, "organic event" (PIW, 14) or coherent holistic experience. Her belief is reminiscent of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's statement: "Depend on it, whatever is grand, whatever is truly organic and living, the whole is prior to the parts."¹ This chapter will attempt to define what Levertov means by "organic event". Specifically, Levertov's use of certain terms such as "crystallization", "constellation of perceptions", "field", "inscape", and "instress" will be explored to show that organic form is not invented by the artist but is an attempted, verbal approximation that parallels a pre-existent, structural integration of inner and outer reality.

Let us start with "inscape" and "instress", the two most difficult terms to be explained in this chapter and ones borrowed from Gerard Manley Hopkins to express the integration of inner and outer perceptions. They are difficult because Hopkins, himself, never clearly defined these two words nor is Levertov using them exactly as he did. Further, inscape and instress, together, form a greater, organic whole that cannot be satisfactorily analyzed or rationally described. Nevertheless, the

¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Philosophic Lectures, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1949), p. 196.

following discussion will, it is hoped, serve as an introduction to, if not a complete explanation of Levertov's use of these words.

Hopkins seemingly used instress to mean the intrinsic energy underlying both natural phenomena and the poet's consciousness. He wrote in his Notebooks that "all things are upheld by instress and are meaningless without it"² In "Comments on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola" Hopkins described how he experienced his own instress or beingness as "that taste of myself". He continued: "Nothing else in nature comes near this unspeakable stress of pitch, distinctiveness, and selving, this selfbeing of my own."³ Thus, instress is the synthetic energy that enables the poet to perceive or become aware of his own inner states and of natural phenomena; and instress, as active verb, is the empathic and meditative act that joins the poet's life force, as subject, with such objects as the movement of his own mind or with the innate essence of the external fact.

Levertov has written even less than Hopkins on the meaning of instress. It is referred to in "Some Notes on Organic Form" as "the experiencing of the perception of inscape, the apperception of inscape" (PIW, 7). Here Levertov's application of Hopkins' term² is less metaphysical in that it is not extended to include the underlying energy that upholds all

²Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Parmenides", The Notebooks and Papers, ed. Humphry House and completed by Graham Storey (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 128.

³Idem, "Opening Passage of Comments on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola", Poems and Prose, ed. W.H. Gardner (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1953), pp. 145-146.

existence. Rather it is limited to the psychological description of a synthetic energy that unites the poet's awareness with the movement of her perceptions of inner and outer reality.

Wilhelmus A.M. Peters, S.J., states that Hopkins' instress cannot be described by sense-impressions. He writes that it "must be interpreted in terms of its impressions on the soul, in terms, that is, of affects of the soul".⁴ Perhaps that is why Levertov refrains from writing extensively about instress in her poetics, because she knows it cannot be described by sense-impressions. Rather it is a colourless, impersonal energy the effect of which is to bring about a state, as she writes, "of recognizing what we perceive" (PIW, 7).

Instress, then, is the synthetic energy that effects a state of self-awareness where one recognizes and moves with the movement of one's own mind. The poetry of organic form comes from this heightened state of recognition and self-awareness where, as Levertov writes, "the metric movement, the measure, is the direct expression of the movement of perception" (PIW, 11). Instress is the force that integrates the organic event such that one is able "to contemplate, to meditate" (PIW, 8) on the flow of perceptions until one observes its intrinsic form or "inscape".

If instress is the seminal, synthetic energy or imagination whose affect is to unite the poet's awareness with the movement of his perceptions

⁴Wilhelmus Antonius Maria Peters, S.J., Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Critical Essay Towards the Understanding of His Poetry (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 14-15.

of inner and outer reality, what then is inscape? It is, as we shall see, the recognizable designs and patterns that one's perceptions of inner and outer reality take. "Design" and "pattern" are words that appear in the following description of inscape found in a letter to Robert Bridges, written by Hopkins in February 1879:

But as air, melody, is what strikes me most of all
in music and design in painting, so design, pattern
or what I am in the habit of calling "inscape" is
what I above all aim at in poetry.⁵

Raymond V. Schoder, S.J., in his article "An Interpretive Glossary of Difficult Words in the Poems", has written that inscape was "formed on 'scape' as = 'pattern' with prefix to emphasize the intrinsic and individual aspect which is the foreground of the word's connotations".⁶ Hopkins' meaning was that of an intrinsic and individualistic pattern or design formed by natural objects and by the content of the poet's mind. Inscape, then, as intrinsic form, was the individuality and distinctiveness of natural objects and of the poet's perceptions. Hopkins wrote that "now it is the virtue of design, pattern, or inscape to be distinctive."⁷ This intrinsic individuality was often seen as a physical distinctiveness as in his poem "Pied Beauty", which praises "dappled things", "skies of couple-colour

⁵Hopkins, The Letters to Robert Bridges, ed. with Notes and an Introduction by Claude Collier Abbot (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 66.

⁶Raymond V. Schoder, S.J., "An Interpretive Glossary of Difficult Words in the Poems", Immortal Diamond: Studies in Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. Normand Weyand, S.J. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1949), p. 217.

⁷Hopkins, Letters to Bridges, p. 66.

as a brinded cow", or "rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim".⁸
 Intrinsic form was described by Hopkins as the distinct individuality of
 the poet's personality. He wrote: "It is the forged feature finds me;
 it is the rehearsal/ of own, of abrupt self" ⁹

Hopkins found validation of his theory of inscape as intrinsic
 individuality of form in his study of the mediaeval Franciscan Duns Scotus.
 Scotus believed that not only did individuals belong to a species, "a
 generic quidditas, or whatness", but that each possessed "a distinctive
 'form' as well: a haecceitas"¹⁰ or thisness was what Hopkins meant by
 inscape or "abrupt self".

Levertov's understanding of inscape is generally compatible with
 Hopkins' use of this term. In "Some Notes on Organic Form", she writes:

Gerard Manley Hopkins invented the word "inscape" to
 denote intrinsic form, the pattern of essential
 characteristics both in single objects and (what is
 more interesting) in objects in a state of relation
 to each other (PIW, 7).

In her poem "Pleasures", certain "pattern(s) of essential characteristics"
 occur:

I like to find
 what's not found
 at once, but lies

within something of another nature,
 in repose, distinct.

⁸ Hopkins, "Pied Beauty", Poems and Prose, p. 30, stanza 1, lines 1-3.

⁹ "Henry Purcell", *ibid.*, p. 41, stanza 2, lines 3-4.

¹⁰ Austin Warren, "Instress of Inscape", Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Critical Symposium (n.p.: The Kenyon Review, 1944; reprint ed., New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1945), p. 76.

Gull feathers of glass, hidden

in white pulp: the bones of squid
which I pull out and lay
blade by blade on the draining board -

tapered as if for swiftness, to pierce
the heart, but fragile, substance
belaying design. Or a fruit, mamey,

cased in rough brown peel, the flesh
rose-amber, and the seed:
the seed a stone of wood, carved and

polished, walnut-coloured, formed
like a brazilnut, but large,
large enough to fill
the hungry palm of a hand.

(WEBB, 17)

Here the individuality or physical distinctiveness of certain natural phenomena is described as, for example, with the seed specifically depicted as "cased in rough brown peel, the flesh/ rose-amber", and as "carved", "polished" and "walnut-coloured". But more importantly, this poem records the "intrinsic form" of the interaction of Levertov's inner and outer perceptions. She begins: "I like to find", suggesting that the perceiver's preferences will greatly influence what is being perceived. Here the acts of finding and revealing external phenomena are influenced by a subjective sifting process in which inner desires, preferences and ideas shape outer perceptions. The poet's desire to find "something of another nature,/ in repose, distinct" acts as an inner magnet around which her perceptions of such external phenomena as the feather-shaft, squid bones, and fruit seed are constellated.

Hopkins' "The Windhover" also begins with a personal pronoun:

I caught this morning morning's minion, kingdom of
 daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his
 riding
 Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
 High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
 In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
 As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend; the hurl and
 gliding
 Rebuffed the big wind. My heart, in hiding
 Stirred for a bird, - the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!¹¹

Yet, Hopkins' prejudices are not the constellating force behind the poem to the extent they are in Levertov's "Pleasures". Her poem is clearly about what subjectively gives her pleasure while Hopkins' poem is less preferential for he has written: "My heart (is) in hiding". Rather his is a poem about his perceptions of an external sensory object, the Windhover. But as in "Pleasures", there is an inscape or interaction between inner and outer reality for Hopkins' heart was "stirred for a bird", as he compassionately recognized and merged with his outer perceptions or sense of the Windhover as a moving, Christly essence.

Levertov explains that she has extended Hopkins' use of inscape and instress "which he seems to have used mainly in reference to sensory phenomena, to include intellectual and emotional experience as well" (PIW, 7). In "The Windhover", Hopkins was not instressing or dwelling on his inner preferences or ideas. Instead he had emptied out this stream of emotions, memories, and concepts such that he could channel the incoming, rhythmic instress of the falcon's being. Levertov, instead, is exploring her inner perceptions as they relate to, select, and align themselves with

¹¹ Hopkins, "The Windhover", Poems and Prose, p. 30, stanza 1.

outer sensory phenomena.

By extending Hopkins' use of inscape and instress, Levertov is more involved with cataloguing the contents of her mind than he was and includes a broader range of psychological experience in her poetry than he did. But, in consequence, such experience is often more coloured by her personality and its idiosyncracies than it would be in a Hopkins poem. This is because Levertov is concerned with recognizing or instressing her own psychological inscape seen in relation to external phenomena while Hopkins, in "The Windhover", was primarily concerned with channeling the synthetic wholeness of sensory phenomena. Hopkins wished to surrender his own "selftaste" to experience the "abrupt self" of the falcon. Levertov, in "Pleasures", is more committed to exploring her own psychological wholeness as it touches upon or interacts with external phenomena. Thus in her poetics, inscape can refer to the individuality or thisness of sensory phenomena, but it is primarily the unique structural integration of the poet's inner and outer perceptions. Instress, on the other hand, is not given Hopkins' broader, Christian cosmologic interpretation as the underlying force that upholds and permeates all existence. It is confined to Levertov's personal experience of it as the synthetic energy underlying her conscious personality that affects an awareness or recognition of each unique, perceptual inscape.

In the organic event the poet instresses, recognizes, or becomes aware of the structural integration or perceptual inscape. And "constellation or perceptions" is another term used to describe these integrated patterns which, as we shall see, occur when the poet's whole

being is activated. "Constellation of perceptions" (PIW, 8) is a term Levertov borrows from twentieth-century psychology. In a recent interview Robert Duncan, Levertov's friend and contemporary poet, traces this term back to the work of a German, gestalt psychologist, Wolfgang Kohler, Duncan states:

. . . in the 1930's we read Wolfgang Kohler and the American lectures on what is form in art,
Place of Value in a World of Facts is the book, and those lectures have a chapter, one solid chapter, on the Gestalt theory of form in art¹²

In reading The Place of Value in a World of Facts, one finds Levertov's debt to Kohler who used the term "constellations"¹³ to refer to constellations of experience and to segregated units of awareness. An even earlier source for Levertov's "constellation of perceptions" occurs in the following passage from Ezra Pound's "A Retrospect" that was published in 1913:

An "Image" is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. I use the term "complex" rather in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists, such as Hart, though we might not agree absolutely in our application.¹⁴

Thus "constellation", "context", or "complex" all are used to describe a unity or integration of sensory perceptions.

How does Levertov use "constellation of perceptions" in "Some Notes

¹²Robert Duncan, "Robert Duncan's Interview", Unmuzzled Ox 2 (1976): 80.

¹³Wolfgang Kohler, The Place of Value in a World of Facts (New York: Liveright Publishing Corp., 1938), p. 304.

¹⁴Ezra Pound, "A Retrospective", Literary Essays, ed. with a Foreword by T.S. Eliot (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperback, 1968), p. 4.

on Organic Form"? She writes that organic form originates from a seminal experience she calls "a sequence or constellation of perceptions" (PIW, 8). This seed experience can be a "linear sequence" which takes place on a horizontal axis and thus has chronological order and duration. Or it can be a "constellation raying out from and into a central focus" (PIW, 9), which takes place on a vertical axis and thus has a spatial dimension that allows for the simultaneous integration of multi-leveled reality.

As an organicist, Levertov places greater emphasis on integration than on duration. Consequently in "Some Notes on Organic Form", this seed experience is referred to primarily as a "cross section or constellation". In the one example given by Levertov of this creative threshold, it is described as a multi-leveled integration of the conscious and unconscious mind and of inner and outer reality, rather than as a narrative sequence of events having duration in time. Her inventory of such a cross section is as follows:

Suppose there's the sight of the sky through a dusty window, birds and clouds and bits of paper flying through the sky, the sound of music from his radio, feelings of anger and love and amusement roused by a letter just received, the memory of some long-past thought or event associated with what's seen or heard or felt, and an idea, a concept, he has been pondering, each qualifying the other; together with what he knows about history; and what he has been dreaming - whether or not he remembers it - working in him. (PIW, 8)

This catalogue or "cross section" of a seminal, organic event stresses the integral interaction of inner and outer reality where feelings are "roused by a letter just received" and a memory is "associated with what's seen or heard or felt". Overall, inner and outer experiences qualify and enhance:

each other to form an organic whole.

In order for inner and outer perceptions to constellate into an integrated whole, the artist's whole being must be activated, or in Coleridge's words: "the whole soul of man (be brought) into activity".¹⁵ It is not a chain reaction of the different parts of his being such that perceptions are broken up and made fragmentary, and only certain fragments are concentrated upon. In organicism, it is quality rather than quantity that is important and that the artist be wholly present and involved in the process from its inception. Levertov explains:

During the writing of a poem the various elements of the poet's being are in communion with each other, and heightened. Ear and eye, intellect and passion, interrelate more subtly than at other times; and the "checking for accuracy", for precision of language, that must take place throughout the writing is not a matter of one element supervising the others but of intuitive interaction between all the elements involved. (PIW, 9)

The organic event, then, is one in which the artist's whole being is actively participating as a mysterious multi-leveled whole. The variables that constitute such an aliveness are infinite. Levertov writes that "one or another element may predominate" (PIW, 8), such that each organic element is a unique, "never-to-be-seen-again" (TSA, 66), coming together of inner and outer reality. Even in her first collection of poems, The Double Image, she was aware of the moment to moment uniqueness of the perceiver's point of

¹⁵ Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, The Selected Poetry and Prose, ed. with an Introduction by Donald A. Stauffer (New York: Random House, Inc., The Modern Library, 1951), p. 269.

perspective: "... leaning still from the window. No one else/ will remember this. No one else will remember" (DI, 16). Line-by-line, organic poetry attempts to match or parallel exactly this unique perceptual integration or organic event. Such poems, Levertov writes, are "analogies, resemblances, natural allegories" (PIW, 7), and through them she strives to approximate each unique inscape by constructing an analogous, verbal equivalent.

"Field" is another scientific term that is interchangeable with "constellation of perceptions" and is used by Levertov to describe the seminal, organic event. Paul Goodman, the poet, sociologist, gestalt therapist, and friend of Levertov's, whose work, Gestalt Therapy, written in collaboration with Frederick Perls and Ralph Hefferline, is helpful in coming to understand her use of this term, defined "field" as an interaction between an organism and its environment:

It makes no sense to speak, for instance, of an animal that breathes without considering air and oxygen as part of its definition, or to speak of eating without mentioning food, or of seeing without light, or locomotion without gravity and supporting ground, or of speech without communicants. There is no single function of any animal that completes itself without objects and environment, whether one thinks of vegetative functions like nourishment and sexuality, or perceptual functions, or motor functions, or feeling, or reasoning Let us call this interacting of organism and environment in any function the "organism/environment field"; and let us remember that no matter how we theorize about impulses, drives, etc., it is always to such an interacting field that we are referring, and not to an isolated animal.¹⁶

¹⁶Paul Goodman, Frederick Perls, and Ralph Hefferline, Gestalt Therapy, 2 vols. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., A Delta Book, 1951), vol. 2: Novelty, Excitement and Growth, by Paul Goodman and Frederick Perls, p. 228.

Goodman went on to define the "field" that man moves in as one where "social-cultural, animal and physical factors interact".¹⁷

Levertov uses "field" in the following poem, "Under a Blue Star", to express the idea of a multi-levelled, holistic experience:

Under a blue star, dragon of skygate . . .
 Such wakenings into twilight, foreboding intermingled
 with joy, beyond
 hope of knowledge. The days
 a web of wires, of energies vibrating
 in chords and single
 long notes of song; but nights
 afloat on dream, dreams
 that float silent, or leave word
 of blue sky-dragons, to seduce
 the day's questions, drown them
 in twilight before dawn . . . What gate
 opens, dim there in the mind's
 field, river-mists of the sky
 veiling its guardians?

(FP, 16)

Here, the "mind's field" is a multi-leveled synthesis of such emotional polarities as a "foreboding intermingled with joy". This "field" is a twilight state that embraces both inner and outer reality. Daily reality is described as:

a web of wires, of energies vibrating
 in chords and single
 long notes of song . . .

This image suggests the human nervous system vibrant with its own energy and with that of the outer sensations that it receives and processes to form "units of awareness" (PIW, 10). Such apperceptions have varying tones and textures. Some have a complexity and density that is compared to a musical

¹⁷Ibid..

"chord" while others are compared to "single/ long notes", implying a patterning of sound and silence.

Nocturnal reality is one of silence, where the poet floats down a river of dreams that carries her beyond the rational towards the mythological realm of "blue sky-dragons". Thus, the "mind's field" is the organic event as threshold state between waking and sleep, between the conscious and the unconscious, between day and night that is "beyond/ hope of knowledge", because it is a mysterious synthesis of rational and irrational worlds.

In order to illustrate further the integral, organic event, I will allegorize a poem by Levertov entitled "The Well" whose images and many psychological overtones dramatize the gestation of organic form:

The Muse
 in her dark habit,
 trim-waisted,
 wades into deep water.

The spring where she
 will fill her pitcher to the brim
 wells out
 below the lake's surface, among
 papyrus, where a stream
 enters the lake and is crossed
 by the bridge on which I stand.

She stoops
 to gently dip and deep enough.
 Her face resembles
 the face of the young actress who played
 Miss Annie Sullivan, she who
 spelled the word 'water' into the palm
 of Helen Keller, opening
 the doors of the world.

In the baroque park,
 transformed as I neared the water
 to Valentines, a place of origin,
 I stand on a bridge of one span
 and see this calm act, this gathering up
 of life, of spring water

and the Muse gliding then
 in her barge without sails, without
 oars or motor, across
 the dark lake, and I know

no interpretation of these mysteries
 although I know she is the Muse
 and that the humble
 tributary of Roding is
 one with Alpheus, the god who as a river
 flowed through the salt sea to his love's well

so that my heart leaps
 in wonder.
 Cold, fresh, deep, I feel the word 'water'
 spelled in my left palm. (JL, 38-39)

In this poem Levertov stands on "a bridge of one span". This suggests that she is on a copula or creative threshold where conscious and unconscious reality are fused. Here organic form begins as a holistic constellation or "cross section" where the multi-levels of inner and outer reality are synthesized.

From this vantage point, Levertov overlooks three bodies of water: a spring and a river that merge together into a "dark lake". Water is a basic requisite for life - an inexhaustible source. The creative act is described as a "gathering up/ of life, or spring water" to suggest the act of instressing or the gathering up of awareness which, like water, is a colourless, primal life-force. The lake, itself, is a synthetic image that represents the constellated integration of the spring as underlying

source with the river or surface stream of the poet's conscious perceptions. The lake, then, is a spatial concept, a container for the spring or the synthetic force bubbling up from beneath the foundations of the river or chronological, surface stream of consciousness whose movement is time.

Further, the spring is likened to the nymph Arethusa, who was pursued by Alpheus, the river god, until she was changed by Artemis-Diana into a spring. These mythological figures represent the integration of the imagination and the conscious mind. Alpheus as the stream of consciousness willfully pursues Arethusa, poetic inspiration. He cannot capture her. It is only through the divine intervention of Diana, who changes inspiration into a spring that the synthesis of imagination and consciousness is brought about. This is allegorized in "The Well" when Arethusa as spring and the river Alpheus merge into "the dark lake".

The muse-figure is also a synthetic image suggesting the integration of multi-leveled reality. She is a go-between who brings the "spring water" or inspiration in her pitcher from the depths of the unconscious into consciousness. Wearing "her dark habit", she is a mysterious figure and one that is not described with many sensual details. Rather she "resembles" an actress who is playing the role of someone else.

The muse is not a colourless instress or life-force emerging from the poet's unconscious, nor is she a human individual characterized by a specific identity or personality. Rather she is a presence or synthetic bridge uniting unindividuated numinosity with the poet's conscious personality. Her presence is that of an impersonal archetype or symbol.

20

As the spring water must be contained within a jug to be of use, so the unconscious, creative impetus must be embodied or channeled through this muse-figure to be made intelligible to man; and as an Annie Sullivan figure, the muse is seen as "opening/ the doors of the world for the blind Helen Keller". This analogy implies that the imagination when channeled through such a muse-figure opens the poet to a holistic, visionary state where total perception is possible.

"The Well", then, can be interpreted as an allegorical enactment of the gestation of organic form and contains many images that dramatize the fact that organic form begins as an organic event. The muse-figure and the lake, in particular, symbolize the fact that organic form begins as an integrated whole. Levertov in her essay, "The Sense of Pilgrimage", describes the meaning of the lake symbol appearing in "The Well" in the following way:

. . . dream, vision, and synthetic intuitions, are pulled together here and revealed in a moment of comprehension: Vision is a lake across which glide manifestations of truth, images of inner knowledge. (PIW, 75)

In this passage, the seminal, organic event occurring in "The Well" is likened to a lake and is a sudden "moment of comprehension". In "Some Notes on Organic Form", it is described as a:

. . . moment of vision, of crystallization in which some inkling of the correspondence between . . . elements occurs; and it occurs as words. (PIW, 8)

Thus, the organic event is a "crystallization" or sudden "moment of vision" where the poet becomes aware of the "correspondence" between what originally appeared as fragmentary and disconnected perceptions and aware of the

formal coherence of existence.

Levertov writes that "for me, back of the idea of organic form is the concept that there is a form in all things (and in our experience) which the poet can discover and reveal" (PIW, 7). The artist does not impress preconceived forms on his experience nor is he arbitrarily inventing new forms. Instead he seeks to verbally approximate or parallel underlying forms, is seeking a verbal "correspondence . . . between elements". This notion of a "correspondence . . . between elements" can be found in chemistry where crystals are often described as being "isomorphous" or "capable of crystallizing in a form similar to that of another compound".¹⁸ Thus to speak metaphorically, the organic poem is like a crystal or isomorph capable of crystallizing in a form that parallels the revealed forms underlying the poet's experience.

In conclusion, it is significant that Levertov uses the word "crystallization" rather than Coleridge's process of assimilation,¹⁹ to describe the inception of organic form. Assimilation is the process by which a plant absorbs alien substances into itself, such as earth, air, or water, which it transforms into a whole organism. Coleridge likened it to

¹⁸ Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1966 ed., s.v. "isomorphous".

¹⁹ Coleridge describes this mental assimilation process as one where: "Events and images; the lively and spirit-stirring machinery of the external world, are like light, and air, and moisture to the seed of the Mind, which would else rot and perish. In all processes of mental evolution the objects of the senses must stimulate the Mind; and the Mind must in turn assimilate and digest the food which it thus receives from without." Treatise on Method, ed. Alice D. Snyder (London: Constable & Co., 1934), p. 7.

the mind's gradual accumulation or absorption of external images, impressions, and other elements. Crystallization, instead refers to the abrupt formation of mineral substances and implies that something suddenly exists where nothing was present before. It suggests that something immediately shapes or forms itself out of a vague shapelessness. This is not Coleridge's process of absorption, meditative evolution, and gradual approach but rather the abrupt, organic event or breakthrough enabling the poet to instress or recognize and verbally approximate the permanent, underlying, structural wholeness of experience.

In essence, the organic event is a sudden crystallization or breakthrough to a heightened state of awareness where inner and outer experience qualify and enhance each other such that the poet's whole being is activated to flow with the underlying and coherent movement of life. It is sudden because to an organicist the notion of a gradual process is an illusion or at least a contradiction of its basic tenet: that the universe is an ever present whole. Unfortunately this vision is difficult to experience and even harder to sustain; and as we shall see in Chapter II, which deals with the crystallization process, the idea of a process is a contradiction that Levertov has not resolved philosophically. She, in fact, never professes to being a pure organicist or states that the universe is an organic whole. Rather, in her poetry, she feels more confident in freezing or focussing in on a momentary glimpse of the underlying structure of an image or image-cluster than in immersing these images in a more

inclusive reverie or flow that would express the underlying movement of life as one unitary action.

CHAPTER II

THE PROCESS OF POETRY

Although every revelation of organic form is a uniquely constellated event, there is what Levertov calls a recurring "process of poetry" (PIW, 7) or development of organic form. This notion of a process implies direction, a past and future, and even a distant goal, all of which contradict the organicist's ideal universe seen as a continuously present whole. These contradictions are in keeping with the fact that Levertov very deliberately does not have a philosophic system and is not tediously demonstrating literary theories, but instead accommodates them to her actual experience as a writer and to her basic priority: the writing of poetry. The following chapter will explore what is meant by a "process of poetry" and how Levertov, through her personal experience of the development of a poem, resolved, to a degree, the conflict between progressive and ideal organicism.

Action and intense movement often characterize the process of poetry. Levertov quotes Edward Dahlberg's "law" that "one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception" (PIW, 13). Charles Olson, another of Levertov's contemporaries, commented on Dahlberg's maxim:

It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at all points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perception, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen . . . always,

one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER,
ON ANOTHER.¹

For Levertov, as well as for Dahlberg and Olson, the process of poetry is one of dynamic action occurring when the perceptual flow is stimulated and intensified. This notion is reminiscent of Coleridge who wrote concerning a great work of art that "MOTION (is) its LIFE."²

In an essay, "The Sense of Pilgrimage", Levertov writes that the highest form of poetry is what she calls "dynamic myth" (PIW, 65). Such poetry "has elements of drama, action, movement, forms of journeyings" and possesses "a magiclike power, not confined within history and reaching beyond ordinary human limitations" (PIW, 68). It is a poetry that records the rite "of passage from one spiritual state into another" (PIW, 71). Levertov concludes her poem, "The Room", stating: "I don't want to escape, only to see/ the enactment of rites" (WEBB, 28). The poetry of dynamic myth charts the "forms of journeyings" or process of poetry which reaches "beyond ordinary human limitations" toward the realization of the internal coherence of things. Process, then, is the dynamic growth of the poet's consciousness where "one perception . . . must lead to a further perception" until awareness intensifies and expands beyond the confines of time into an ecstatic, holistic experience.

¹Charles Olson, "Projective Verse", Selected Writings, ed. with Introduction by Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1966), p. 17.

²Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria", The Selected Poetry and Prose, ed. with Introduction by Donald A. Stauffer (New York: Random House Inc., The Modern Library, 1951), p. 269.

An example given by Levertov of the poetry of dynamic myth is her poem, "The Goddess", which is based on an actual visionary event. Levertov explains that the poem "is not based on a dream but on an actual waking vision" (PIW, 72):

She in whose lipservice
I passed my time,
whose name I knew, but not her face,
came upon me where I lay in Lie Castle!

Flung me across the room, and
room after room (hitting the walls, re-
bounding-to the last
sticky wall-wrenching away from it
pulled hair out!)
till I lay
outside the outer walls!

There in cold air
lying still where her hand had thrown me,
I tasted the mud that splattered my lips:
the seeds of a forest were in it,
asleep and growing! I tasted
her power!

The silence was answering my silence,
a forest was pushing itself
out of sleep between my submerged fingers.

I bit on a seed and it spoke on my tongue
of a day that shone already among stars
in the water-mirror of low ground,

and a wind rising ruffled the lights:
she passed near me returning from the encounter,
she who plucked me from the close rooms,

without whom nothing
flowers, fruits, sleeps in season,
without whom nothing
speaks in its own tongue, but returns
lie for lie!

(WEBB, 43-44)

This poem records the growth and "awakening" of Levertov's consciousness to

the truth. She is expelled from "Lie Castle", an isolated state of being where the poet paid "lipservice" to Truth and could only "name" it with words. She had not as yet experienced a direct confrontation with its "face". Her expulsion from "Lie Castle" is violent and sudden whereby the Goddess of "Truth" (PIW, 72) "came upon me" and "flung me across the room," and the poet is seen as "hitting the walls" and "wrenching away from" a "sticky wall" which "pulled hair out." Here the process of poetry occurs as a dramatic and violent change in consciousness that has been traditionally called an "experience of conversion".³

M.H. Abrams in Natural Supernaturalism states that this experience is at least as old and probably much older than the Bible, the document which has provided "the great code" of Western art. He explains:

While the main line of change in the prominent classical patterns of history, whether primitivist or cyclical, is continuous and gradual, the line of change in Christian history (and this difference is pregnant with consequences) is right-angled: the key events are abrupt, cataclysmic, and make a drastic, even an absolute difference.⁴

He quotes a passage from Coleridge's ode "To William Wordsworth" to show how this pattern of abrupt change in Christian history manifests itself on a psychological level. When Coleridge heard Wordsworth read his

³ M.H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., The Norton Library, 1971), p. 48.

⁴ Ibid., p. 36.

Prelude for the first time, he experienced a drastic change of mood that is described by Abrams as a "passage from the sleep of death back to life."⁵ Coleridge wrote:

Ah! as I listened with a heart forlorn,
The 'pulses of my being beat anew:
And even as Life returns upon the drowned,
Life's joy rekindling roused a throng of pains-
Keen pangs of Love, awakening as a babe
Turbulent, with an outcry in the heart.⁶

Levertov, in "The Goddess", experiences a similarly violent and painful process of reawakening as did Coleridge. First there is an increased sense of space as Levertov is "plucked . . . from the closed rooms" and thrown beyond "the outer walls" to discover what is "outside" of her introverted isolation. This discovery is accompanied by an awakening and freshening of external sensation. She feels the "cold air", sees the "day that shone already among the stars", and tastes "the mud" in which her fingers are "submerged". She has been violently removed from a state of psychological isolation to become physically involved, even "submerged" in the surrounding, "outside" world. Another dramatic change that has occurred is the transition from giving "lipservice" and naming names to a state of communicative silence where "the silence was answering my silence." And accompanying this growing sense of space, silence, and physical sensation is the illuminated vision of the sun reflected "in the water-mirror of low ground" and of "a wind" like the Holy Spirit that "rising

⁵ Ibid., p. 135.

⁶ Coleridge, "To William Wordsworth", quoted in *ibid.*

ruffled the lights."

Thus in "The Goddess", Levertov is violently converted from the lies, empty names, and fantasies of "Lie Castle" to the literal, concrete truth of physical sensations and external facts, such as the seed, lights, or rising wind. For when one remains in an introverted state dominated by subjective fantasies and associations, one experiences the "lie" or illusion of isolation and fragmentation which contradicts the "Truth" of organicism -- that each present moment and, especially for Levertov, each external fact is expressive of the holistic movement of life. Such an abrupt and absolute psychological conversion resolves, to a degree, Levertov's conflict between progressive and ideal organicism. Process implies movement from a past state of psychological fragmentation to a future state of empathic reintegration. But Levertov's actual experience of this transaction is an abrupt psychological change and is thus largely compatible with the tenets of pure organicism which deny both the existence of time and that process is a gradual advancement towards a distant goal. For the organicist, the universe is a living whole and access to this fact is always immediately possible, provided one can open to it.

Not all of Levertov's poems record this process of poetry that results in a revelation of the internal coherence of things. Many poems omit the fragmentary, pre-conversion phase and point directly to what is -- a momentary insight or epiphany:

A headless squirrel, some blood
oozing from the unevenly
chewed-off neck

lies in rainsweet grass
near the woodshed door.
Down the driveway

the first irises
have opened since dawn,
ethereal, their mauve

almost a transparent gray,
their dark veins
bruise-blue.

(SD, 45)

Others point to the process of poetry as blocked by such negative states as fear or impatience. In "Who is At My Window" fear blocks the poet's ability to let go and open to perceive the internal coherence of things:

Who is at my window, who, who?
It's the blind cuckoo, mulling
the old song over.

The old song is about fear, about
tomorrow and next year

I want to move deeper into today;
he keeps me from the work.
Today and eternity are nothing to him.
His wings spread at the window make it dark.

Go from my window, go, go!

(OT & S, 50)

But the poems that are central to Levertov's theory of organicism are those that do record the psychological growth of consciousness that leads to a realization of the organic, internal relatedness of things. Such process-oriented poetry is not unique to Levertov but can be found in the writings of certain Romantic poets. It can be seen in the following comparison of Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" and Levertov's

"To the Snake". Wordsworth's poem is as follows:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed - and gazed - but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when upon my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.⁷

This poem records the growth of the poet's mind. The first three stanzas are written in the past tense and consist of Wordsworth's recollections of "a host, of golden daffodils". These memories comprise the content of the poet's reverie that is presently flashed "upon that inward eye". As the content of consciousness unfolds, mental comparisons are at first made such as "I wandered lonely as a cloud" or "continuous as the stars that shine/ And twinkle on the milky way,/ They stretch in

⁷William Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud", Selected Poems and Prefaces, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., Riverside Editions, 1965), p. 191.

never-ending line" Then the poet moves from a state of intellectual comparison into a non-analytic state of total perception where "I gazed - and gazed - but little thought". In the last stanza, the poet experiences a released state of being or expanded awareness of the space in which these past recollections are presently occurring which is described as "that inward eye". This is the realm that is beyond the control of conscious will or logic where the poet lies passively in a "vacant or pensive mood". Here the poet is released from the rigid confines of intellectualism and conscious preconceptions into an ecstatic "bliss of solitude" and empathy as his "heart with pleasure fills and dances with the daffodils".

Levertov's "To the Snake", also records the growth of the poet's mind that results in a released state of being:

Green Snake, when I hung you round my neck
and stroked your cold, pulsing throat
as you hissed to me, glinting
arrowy gold scales, and I felt
the weight of you on my shoulders,
and the whispering silver of your dryness
sounded close at my ears -

4 Green Snake - I swore to my companions that certainly
you were harmless! But truly
I had no certainty, and no hope, only desiring
to hold you, for that joy,
which left
a long wake of pleasure, as the leaves moved
and you faded into the pattern
of grass and shadows, and I returned
smiling and haunted, to a dark morning.

(WEBB, 74)

In Levertov's poem, the process or growth of consciousness is more abrupt and sudden than it is as portrayed by Wordsworth in "I Wandered

Lonely as a Cloud", where he moves gradually from similes and intellectual comparisons to sensual, primarily visual perceptions, to a more spatial, ecstatic level of consciousness. Levertov begins directly with the vivid sensations of the "cold", "glinting", "pulsing" snake. Nor are these perceptions primarily visual as they are in Wordsworth's poem. In "To the Snake", all the senses are active for Levertov sees the snake's "arrowy gold scales", hears the snake "as you hissed at me", strokes its "cold, pulsing throat", and feels "the weight of you on my shoulders".

But the underlying process of poetry is essentially the same for both poets. Like Wordsworth, Levertov enters a state of passive receptivity, that is not distorted by logical preconceptions or expectations. She states that "I have no certainty, and no hope" Rather she simply perceives the snake and feels an empathetic rapport with it that is characterized by a growth of passion such that the poet is seen as "only desiring/ to hold you, for that joy".

While Wordsworth's poem gradually progresses toward an ecstatic merger of the poet's "heart" and the dancing daffodils, Levertov's poem climaxes with a similar empathic perception of the snake. Then, the poet's empathy for the snake spreads out and enriches the surrounding environment in a "wake of pleasure" such that the morning takes on the attributes of the snake's mysteriousness and becomes similarly cold, dark and shining. Thus, although for Levertov, the process is more abrupt and sensual than it is in Wordsworth's poem with his gradual approach to epiphany, both poets see the process of poetry as a psychological

transaction where consciousness expands into a released state of joy, and blissful empathy for the surrounding natural world.

Levertov's poem, "To the Snake", evidences another characteristic of the process of poetry, that it often consists of a phase of "uncertainty" or disintegration followed by one of re-synthesis. This dual process of dissolution and reintegration is reminiscent of Coleridge's "secondary Imagination", an agency that "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create"⁸ Such dissolution and reintegration is often brought about by involuntary emotional demands seen as providing the underlying energy for what Levertov calls the "crystallization" (PIW, 8) of a poem. She writes that one should "re-read Stendhal on this word" (PIW, 17). In his work, De l'amour, Stendhal put forth his celebrated theory of crystallization, the psychic process by which the imagination shapes reality through its obsessions, desires, and illusions. Writing specifically of the imagination's power, when one is in love, to transfigure reality and to shape the beloved's image, Stendhal stated that "what I have called crystallization is a mental process which draws from everything that happens new proofs."

⁸Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria", Selected Poetry and Prose, p. 263.

of the perfection of the loved one."⁹ Agreeing with him, Levertov writes that "the Imagination does not arise from the environment but has the power to create it" (PIW, 205).

A poem, then, often springs from a "demand" (PIW, 8) or "fundamental emotional need" (PIW, 19) that fires the imagination's dual process of dissolution and reintegration. Such expressive demands bring about "a state in which the heat of feelings warm the intellect" (PIW, 8). The poet experiences a state of emotional elevation not unlike a psychic heat or purifying, alchemical fire which melts down a rigid balance of beliefs and preconceptions freeing the emotions and intellect to be reformed into an organic whole. This process can be likened to the formation of crystals which generally begins by "disturbing the balance, or equilibrium, that exists between the crystalline material and the gas, liquid, or amorphous solid that exists in contact with it",¹⁰ such that

⁹ This quotation appears at the end of the following passage containing "The Salzburg Bough" metaphor used by Stendhal to explain the crystallization process where he writes: "Leave a lover with his thoughts for twenty-four hours, and this is what will happen:

"At the salt mines of Salzburg, they throw a leafless wintry bough into one of the abandoned workings. Two or three months later they haul it out covered with a shining deposit of crystals. The smallest twig, no bigger than a tom-tit's claw, is studded with a galaxy of scintillating diamonds. The original branch is no longer recognizable.

"What I have called crystallization is a mental process which draws from everything that happens new proofs of the loved one." *De l'amour*, trans. Gilbert and Suzanne Sala with an Introduction by Jean Stewart and B.C.J.G. Knight (n.p.: The Merlin Press, 1957; reprint ed., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1975), p. 45.

¹⁰ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15 ed., s.v. "Crystallization and Crystal Growth".

a new substance crystallizes in place of the original ones.

William Carlos Williams, who has influenced Levertov's theory of poetics, explained this emotional alchemy or crystallization process in the following way:

What is the origin of heat? Something has stirred us, some perception linked with emotion. We are angry, we are committed to something in our lives, as with the poem. It doesn't matter what it has been - anything. We heat up. This incentive is usually secret, it is guided by our fears perhaps. But we are heated and (if we can get quite enough, as in jail, or running away - finally) we melt and the imagination is set to flow into its new mould.¹¹

And in an interview, Levertov describes this plasticity or flow of inner sounds, images, and silence as a necessary return to a state of sub-vocal plasticity:

What do you mean by the inner voice?

What it means to me is that a poet, a verbal kind of person, is constantly talking to himself, inside of himself, constantly approximating and evaluating and trying to grasp his experience in words. And the "sound", inside his head, of that voice is not necessarily identical with his literal speaking voice, nor is his inner vocabulary identical with that which he uses in conversation. At their best sound and words are song, not speech. The written poem is then a record of that inner song. (PIW, 24)

At times Levertov sees the growth of organic form as moving back even before the inner mumble to a state where the internal monologue dissolves

¹¹ William Carlos Williams, "A Beginning on the Short Story: Notes", Selected Essays (New York: Random House, 1954; reprint ed., New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperback, 1969), p. 309.

entirely. It is described as an inner peace or "silence within myself where I didn't see or feel more, but was simply resting" (PIW, 21). In the earlier quoted poems, "The Goddess" and "To the Snake", this is experienced as a communicative silence, or fertile void of uncertainty out of which comes a renewal of creative energy.

It is necessary, then, that the poet have a high tolerance for the ambiguity and chaos that results from the dissolution of intellectual preconceptions and rigidities. In "Some Note Book Pages", Levertov writes:

The music of poetry comes into being when thought and feeling remain unexpressed until they become Word, become Flesh (i.e., there is no prior paraphrase). The awareness of them remains vague - perhaps oppressive - perhaps very oppressive - yet the poet does not give way to "irritable searchings" but waits in passionate passivity (Negative Capability) until thought and feelings crystallize (PIW, 17).

Levertov is referring here to Keats' "Negative Capability, which he described as "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubt, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" ¹²

The poet must tolerate the apparent disconnection of observations until the underlying coherence of things reveals itself and organic form crystallizes into words. Levertov explains:

¹² John Keats, "Letters to George and Thomas Keats, December 2, 1817", Selected Poetry and Letters, ed. with Introduction by Richard Harter Fogle (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969), p. 308.

The pressure of demand and the meditation on its elements culminate in a moment of vision, of crystallization If he forces a beginning before this point, it won't work.

(PIW, 8-9)

Keats, in his famous "Ode On A Grecian Urn", was able to open to the urn's ambiguous presence portrayed by such attributes as "quietness", "Attic shape", "fair attitude", and also as "Cold Pastoral". He opened himself not only to the urn's beauty, but also to the truth of sexual violence and struggle as portrayed in its painted motif, to a joy followed by "high sorrow", and finally to its impersonal coldness and terrible desolation.

In a poem, "Modes of Being", Levertov struggles to open to a similar, ambiguous experience of joy and pain:

Unable
to know for long
what we know; neither intense love
nor intense pain. Nature itself
allows the delight of sparrows
ruffling an inch deep lake of rain
in the jailhouse yard.
Joy
is real, torture
is real, we strain to hold
a bridge between them open,
and fail,
or all but fail.

(FD, 99)

Here Levertov keeps "a bridge between them open," perceiving both "the delight of sparrows" and the human suffering of imprisoned men. And in "To the Snake", she remains open to the ambiguity of both the snake's beauty and its perhaps poisonous bite.

If the poet is able to stay with the uncertainty and ambiguity of a disintegrating experience, a re-synthesis follows that is characterized by a higher level of integration. It is one in which the process has led, for example, from a state of isolation and fragmentation to one that stresses the internal relatedness or coherence of things. In Levertov's "The Goddess", for example, the poet moves from the walled-off isolation of "Lie Castle" to submerge herself in a highly sensual experience of the "cold air", "mud", "stars", and visionary lights.

Emotionally this process of poetry expands from feelings of loneliness and separation towards a growing empathy. Levertov states that "all the thinking I do about poetry leads me back, always, to Reverence for Life as the ground for poetic activity, because it seems the ground for Attention" (PIW, 54). Attention or contemplation, for Levertov, implies a careful observing that is not sentimentality, but a caring for life and the movement of its energy. Meditation occurs when the poet experiences an empathic reverence for life as seen in "Five Poems from Mexico". Here life is so important it is found even in an inanimate mountain likened to a bull-god and worshipped by Levertov who assumes the persona of a devotee:

Golden the high ridge of thy back, bull-mountain,
and coffee-black thy full sides.
The sky decks thy horns with violet,
with cascades of clouds. The brown hills
are thy cows. Shadows
of zopilotes cross and slowly
cross again
thy flanks, lord of herds.

(JL, 28)

And in "The Great Dahlia", she reverentially addresses a flower saying:

Burn, burn the day. The wind
is trying to enter and praise you.
Silence seems something you have chosen,
withholding your bronze voice.
We bow before your pride.

(WEBH, 51)

Another characteristic of the reintegration phase of the crystallization of poetry is that of a growing sense of space, silence, and light. In "Some Notes on Organic Form", Levertov reminds us that the word "to contemplate comes from 'templum', temple, a place, a space for observation" (PIV, 8). It is the place one stands with a perspective to observe. And here the contemplative process of poetry provides entry to a more spatial level of consciousness. It should be remembered that in organicism greater emphasis is placed on spatial integration than on duration or temporal sequence for, in its purest form, organicism is a theory that denies the existence of time. Rather, it postulates that the universe is an eternally present wholeness, and the efforts of an organicist are to experience this integrated timeless whole.

Levertov seeks such a visionary experience in a poem entitled "A Letter to William Kinter of Muhlenberg". Here she describes a quiet epiphany, experienced on a bus "going home to New York" of light, colour, and human relatedness which finally expands into "the vast/ December moon":

the gold light on a rocky slope,
the road-constructors talking to each other,

bear-brown of winter woods, and later
light of New Jersey factories and the vast

December moon. I saw
without words within me, saw

as if my eyes
had grown bigger and knew

how to look without
being told what it was they saw.

(JL, 44-45)

The poet's eyes grow "bigger" and look without preconceptions, "without being told what it was they saw", as consciousness expands into an experience of silent space that is uncluttered and "without words". It is an illuminated vision of "golden light on a rocky slope" and the "lights of New Jersey factories and the vast/ December moon".

Although in such a visionary state, the internal monologue dissolves entirely and the poet rests "without words", this is not the final aim of the crystallization process of poetry which is both a psychological as well as a verbal transaction. Levertov is not primarily a mystic seeking visionary experience, but a poet seeking both psychological and verbal understanding. The act of writing is the means by which the poet stimulates the simultaneous unfoldment and discovery of both "intuitive knowledge" and its "verbal equivalents"

(PIW, 73), as Levertov explains:

One is obliged to describe the process as a sequence, when in fact the separate elements of it overlap and synthesize. Readers who are not themselves practicing poets often assume there is a hiatus between seeing and saying; but the poet does not see and then begin to search for words to say what he sees; he begins to see and at once begins to say or to sing, and only in the action of verbalization does he see further. His language is not more dependent on his vision than his vision is upon his language. This is surely one of the primary distinctions between poet and mystic.

(PIW, 73)

For the poet, perception and expression are not separate acts but are a single act forming an organic whole. When the poet "sees" clearly, he also achieves clarity of expression and verbal understanding. And the act of verbalization leads the poet towards further gnosis. Thus the process of poetry is both a verbal and perceptual act that crystallizes in the realization of the internal relatedness or coherence of things. Process implies a movement in time from a past state of psychological fragmentation to a future state of empathic integration. But, as has been shown, Levertov, to a degree, resolves her conflict between progressive and ideal organicism in that she experiences the crystallization process not as a gradual approach to epiphany, but as an abrupt, absolute transition from a phase of violent disintegration to one of reintegration that results in an expanded level of consciousness characterized by the growth of compassion, space, silence, and light.

CHAPTER III

THE INNATE GROWTH OF ORGANIC FORM

The growth of organic form is innate and self-organizing. It is not impressed upon experience, but grows from within an organic event.

In "Some Notes on Organic Form", Levertov writes that "organic form" is "intrinsic form" and that the organic poet seeks out "inherent, though not immediately apparent, form" (PIW, 7). This notion of an "intrinsic", "inherent", "organic form" can be traced back to the following quotation from Coleridge:

The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form . . . as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fulness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form.¹

Here, organic form is used by Coleridge as an analogical substitute for the seventeenth and eighteenth century's mechanistic theories of art that were influenced by the writings of Hobbes, Hume, Locke, and Hartley. In these various theories of mechanism, the artistic work, as M.H. Abrams points out, was generally seen as the product "of an intelligent artisan or architect, who makes his selection from materials so proffered, and then

¹Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Literary Criticism", The Selected Poetry and Prose, ed. with an Introduction by Donald A. Stauffer (New York: Random House, Inc., The Modern Library, 1951), pp. 432-433.

puts them together according to his pre-existent blueprint or plan".²

Thus the artistic work, as machine, was rationally manipulated and crafted from without. Levertov writes that mechanistic poetry:

seeks to invent, for thought and feeling and perception not experienced as form, forms to contain them; or to make appropriate re-use of existing metric forms (It) implies a view of synthesis of form and content as an event brought about by the exercise of the artist's power and cunning, but not as an organic event, i.e., this view does not look on forms as inherent in content. (PIW, 14)

Seeking an alternative to these mechanistic theories of art, Coleridge took a first step when he wrote in his "Preface to Christabel":

I have only to add that the metre of Christabel is not, properly speaking, irregular, though it may seem so from its being founded on a new principle: namely, that of counting in each line the accents, not the syllables. Though the latter may vary from seven to twelve, yet in each line the accents will be found to be only four. Nevertheless, this occasional variation in number of syllables is not introduced wantonly, or for the mere ends of convenience, but in correspondence with some transition in the nature of the imagery, or passion.³

Although Coleridge continued to use a regular meter of four stresses per line, he occasionally loosened his line such that a "variation in the number of syllables" corresponded with a modulation in a poem's "imagery or passion". This pointed the way towards an intrinsic "synthesis of form and content" and broke ground for Levertov's theory of organic form.

² M.H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 166.

³ Coleridge, "Preface to Christabel", Selected Poetry and Prose, p. 25.

Unlike Coleridge, Levertov dispenses entirely with traditional meter. In writing what she describes as "a poetry that in thought and in feeling and in perception seeks the forms peculiar to these experiences" (PIW, 14), Levertov allows her perceptions to shape the poem. In "The Singer", the poet's perceptions cluster together as they occur:

Crackle and flash almost in the kitchen sink - the
thunderclap follows even as I
jump back frightened,
afraid to touch metal -

The roofgutters pouring down
whole rivers, making holes in the earth -
The electric bulbs fade and go out,
another thin crackling lights the window
and in the instant before the next onslaught of kettle-drums,

a small bird, I don't know its name,
among the seagreen tossed leaves

begins its song. (RA, 71)

This poem is formed by the emergent perceptions constellating a present "instant", rather than from a pre-existent plan or metric pattern. In "Some Notes on Organic Form", Levertov writes that "the varying speed and gait of different strands of perception within an experience" (PIW, 11) shape an organic poem. In a "New York Quarterly" interview, she explains further when she writes that, for example, line breaks record the "nonsyntactic hesitations, or waitings, that occur in the thinking-feeling process".⁴ Such a hesitation appears in the first line of "The Singer" where the pause breaks the phrase "- the/ thunderclap" into two lines and recreates a momentary

⁴Denise Levertov, "Craft Interview", *The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from The New York Quarterly*, ed. William Packard (New York: Doubleday & Company for The New York Quarterly Poetry Review Foundation, Inc., 1974), pp. 88-89.

silence in "thinking" and "feeling" experienced by the poet in that instant preceding a thunderclap. Also in stanza one, line-speed changes from the first long line of run-together perceptions -- the long "crackle and flash" of lightning -- to a series of shorter lines expressing the staccato rhythm where the poet jumps fearfully out of the lightning's reach. And the final event, the bird's song, is a revelatory pause, which is set apart by dropping and moving the final line to the left. This pause is a penetration into the underlying, fragile beauty of an instant "before the next onslaught of kettle drums". This momentary depth perception into the minute ramifications of things is not preconceived but is discovered.

Lever tov's belief that the creative process is an exploration leading to the discovery of organic form has been influenced by the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson. His famous maxim: "As the fact for the form"⁵ is quoted by Lever tov in "Some Notes on Organic Form" and is echoed in her comment:

I believe content determines form, and yet that content is discovered only in form. Like everything living, it is a mystery. The revelation of form itself can be a deep joy (PIW, 3)

Lever tov assumes Emerson's view that the artistic process is an adventure where one discovers what one has to say only in attempting to communicate it. The discovery of form implies that the work, as it unfolds, produces further perceptions and words. The poem, as work in progress, is

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination", The Complete Works, with a Biographical Introduction and Notes by Edward Waldo Emerson, 12 vols. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin & Co., The Riverside Press, 1904; reprint ed., New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1968), vol. 8: Letters and Social Aims, p. 54

viewed as a catalyst for the artist's thoughts and for his own self-expression; and as a catalyst attends a process, but often does not enter into the final product, the forerunning words or thoughts growing innately from an environmental experience can lead to a poem, although they might not appear in the permanent product. Levertov explains the discovery of organic form in terms of such catalytic thoughts and words:

These words sometimes remain the first, sometimes in the completed poem their eventual place may be elsewhere, or they may turn out to have been only forerunners, which fulfilled their function in bringing him the words which are the actual beginning of the poem. (PIW, 9)

There is no knowing at the onset how these forerunning words and thoughts will be placed in the finalized poem because there are no rules or absolutes governing the innate growth of an organic poem. Emerson wrote that there are "no practical rules for the poem"⁶ and that "every part of the poem is therefore a true surprise".⁷ The process and the resultant, artistic work are mysterious. This mystery does not result from poetic expertise or conscious craft. It is there in spite of the poet's efforts. Levertov writes that a certain poem contains an autonomous life, mystery, and instress of its own:

Two girls discover
the secret of life
in a sudden line of
poetry.

⁶Idem, "Instinct and Inspiration", The Complete Works, vol. 12: History of the Intellect and Other Papers, p. 72.

⁷Ibid., p. 71.

I who don't know the
secret wrote
the line. They
told me

(through a third person)
they had found it
but not what it was
not even

what line it was.

(OT & S, 21)

Here Levertov's poem becomes the environment of a new experience, for "two girls" who discover its "secret", hidden form. Thus the finalized poem becomes a catalyst or tool for further experience.

Accompanying Emerson's belief that the artistic process is one of discovery and exploration is the notion that the poet is a channel. For Emerson, inspiration was the active principle while the poet was merely a passive instrument. He wrote in "Art" that the artist must refrain from willfully asserting his ego and instead seek "abandonment" and "self-surrender".⁸ He explained that the artist:

is not to speak his own words, or do his own works, but he is to be an organ through which the universal mind acts.⁹

In a Platonic way, Emerson implied that a poem was not a confession but rather a revelation of the discovered forms of things. The poet's mind was a channel that was open to the Idea which made the thing what it was recognized to be. Thus in his essays, he placed greater emphasis on the

⁸Idem, "Art", The Complete Works, vol. 7: Society and Solitude, p. 49.

⁹Ibid., pp. 48-49.

poet's receptivity to these supposedly objective forms than he did on the individual mind.

Although Levertov does not envision the organic poet as a passive receptacle for the expression of Platonic Ideas, she does explore the role of the poet as a channel for the innate growth of organic form in the poem "The Unknown":

The kettle changes its note,
the steam sublimed.

Supererogatory divinations one is
lured on by!

The routine
is decent. As if the white page
were a clean tablecloth,
as if the vacuumed floor were
a primed canvas, as if
new earrings made from old shells
of tasty abalone were nose rings for the two most beautiful
girls of a meticulous island, whose bodies are oiled as one oils
a table of teak . . . Hypocrisies
of seemingly hope, performed to make a place
for miracles to occur; as if the day
is no day for miracles, then the preparations
are an order one may rest in.

But one doesn't want
rest, one wants miracles. Each time that note
changes (which is whenever you let it) - the kettle
(already boiling) passing into enlightenment without
a moment's pause, out of fury into
quiet praise - desire
wakes again. Begin over.

It is to hunt a white deer
in snowy woods. Beaten
you fall asleep in the afternoon
on a sofa.

And wake to witness,
softly backing away from you, mollified,
all that the room had insisted on -
eager furniture, differentiated planes . . .

Twilight has come, the windows
are big and solemn, brimful of the afterflow;
and sleep has swept through the mind, loosening
brown leaves from their twigs to drift

out of sight

beyond the horizon's black rooftops.

A winter's dirt

makes Indian silk squares on the windowpanes,
semi transparent, a designed
middle distance.

The awakening is
to transformation,
word after word.

(SD, 27-28)

Levertov is describing certain ritual preparations that are
"performed to make a place/ for miracles to occur", or at least, if no
miracles occur, to provide "an order one may rest in". The cleaning of
house or studio, the priming of a canvas, the staring at a white page, and
the oiling of one's body, "as one oils/ a table of teak", are simple ritual
acts similar to those done in Zen art forms to gather up and focus the
attention, such as the tea ceremony, calligraphy, or brush painting. For
Levertov, this too "meticulous" gathering up of the attention does not
result in a state of alert receptivity, but in frustrated hopefulness. The
recurring "as if's" suggest that Levertov is trying consciously to imagine
or make-up rather than let the organic event spontaneously occur. Finally
she concedes that perhaps today is "no day for miracles", the only one
being that the boiling kettle passes fancifully "into enlightenment without/
a moment's pause". Not only does she make fun of herself here, she also
suggests, through the "enlightened kettle" image, that the change from
blindness to vision will happen "whenever you let it". The poet must get
out of the way and then by his very effortlessness, he will be acted upon.

But after a moment of "quiet praise", Levertov's desire for miracles reawakens and she struggles again to draft a poem or sketch a picture. This struggle after the elusive beauty of the natural world is described as "to hunt a white deer/ in snowy woods". It is similar to that described by William Carlos Williams in "To Elsie":

... the imagination strains
after deer
going by fields of goldenrod in

the stifling heat of September
Somehow
it seems to destroy us

It is only in isolate flecks that
something
is given off¹⁰

Levertov's and Williams' perceptual constellations are coloured differently. Her images of snow and white deer suggest an elusive, inhuman purity while Williams' deer in golden fields suggest a rich warmth that is surrounded and stifled. But both constellations share a common theme: the hunt is seen as a futile struggle. Williams states that this straining after revelation seems "to destroy us", while Levertov is also "beaten" in her struggle and falls asleep. By letting go of her willfulness, she awakes on a threshold as "middle distance" between the willed and the spontaneous, the conscious and the unconscious, where she discovers the "isolate flecks" of inscape seen as winter dirt transformed for a moment into a design: "Indian silk squares of the windowpanes/ semi transparent".

¹⁰ William Carlos Williams, *The Reader*, ed. with Introduction by M.L. Rosenthal (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1966), pp. 19-20.

Although rituals are performed to gather up and focus the poet's attention, she cannot consciously evoke a revelation of form. She must let go of the desire and struggle to achieve and patiently wait "to witness" and channel an illuminated inscape. Thus, before sleep the room was like a canvas that was being primed where the poet assertively acted upon objects in her environment, performing her "decent" routine, cleaning the tablecloth, vacuuming the floor, and oiling the table. After the "awakening", the environment becomes like a painting possessing a "designed/middle distance" that is animated and acts upon the passive poet to create a spacious and articulate vision, with apparent perspective, of a roomful of "eager furniture" and "differentiated planes" that softly is seen as "backing away from" the poet, rather than as the poet acting upon it.

"The Unknown" charts the innate growth of organic form to the point where perceptions crystallize into "word after word". What is clear is that the poet cannot consciously evoke a revelation of form. Before the crystallization of the perceptual constellation, the poet can only receptively wait, witness, and observe. In this, Levertov's poet is similar to Emerson's passive seer or channel who admits: "I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all."¹¹ But once an intense perceptual flow begins and words arise, the poet, as we shall see, can intuitively work with and even direct the growth of organic form.

Before discussing the intuition and its role in Levertov's poetics, I

¹¹ Emerson, "Nature", The Complete Works, vol. 1: Nature Addresses and Lectures, p. 10.

would like to give another example of the growth of organic form as it appears in her work -- the incorporation of scholarly knowledge or mythology, a traditional poetic subject, into a poetry that cannot be preconceived but must evolve innately from an organic event. Essentially her use of myth is limited to that which has been relived by the poet herself. When such materials come from an authentic, personal experience, they can become the content of an organic poem. Mythic elements are most often relived as dreams, waking visions, or momentary revelations.

For example, a personal, first-hand experience or momentary vision gives rise to the poem, "The Instant", which makes reference to Welsh mythology:

"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.

(PIW, 69)

Here, the discovery of form is extended to include a mythic spirit of place where Levertov and her mother momentarily perceive Mount Snowdon not simply as "a distant high Mountain but of the world of Welsh legend" (PIW, 69).

This personal, first-hand glimpse spontaneously evokes a use of mythology that is innate and appropriate as when the mountain's old, pre-Christian name, "Eryri", springs "atavistically" (PIW, 70) to her mother's lips.

In certain poems, such as "Xochipilli" or "Psalms Concerning Castel",

except as it has been relived by her. But occasionally dreams, as in the following poem, "The Runes", are given the status of a newly minted myth:

(These words were given to me in a dream. In the dream I was a Finnish child of 8 or 9 who has been given by her teacher the task of writing out these 3 ancient runes of her people. This is how they went:)

- (1) Know the pinetrees. Know the orange dryness of sickness and death in needle and cone. Know them too in green health, those among whom your life is laid.
- (2) Know the ship you sail on. Know its timbers. Deep the fjord waters where you sail, steep the cliffs, deep into the unknown coast goes the winding fjord. But what would you have? Would you be tied up to a sandwhite quay in perpetual sunshine, yards and masts sprouting little violet mandolins?
- (3) In city, in suburb, in forest, no way to stretch out the arms - so if you would grow, go straight up or deep down.

(OT&S, 83)

Levertov has precisely recorded the exact words that "were given me in a dream". She did not set out to write a poem based on her intellectual understanding of Finnish mythology. The dream, itself, teaches her what and how to write; all she must do is carefully record that which she has lived.

These dream runes are given the status of a newly minted myth in that they represent an English translation of a doubly indecipherable antiquity -- runes presumably in Finnish. They appear as newly coined expressions of formulaic phrases coming from the supposed "folkloric tradition" of, as Levertov writes, "her people". But these highly personal and cryptic runes allude to a vague folk wisdom rather than refer to a specific mythology. For example, allusion is made to certain mythic themes. In the first rune, the

natural, existential cycles of growth, life and death are embodied in the image of the pine forest. In the second rune there is a mythic journey through the labyrinth of a "winding fjord". Thus desiring to extend the discovery of form to include the spirit of place, of ritual objects, and of her own dreamscape, Levertov alludes, in a limited and highly personal fashion, to "a folkloric tradition of myth" as it has been relived by the poet herself.

The mythic journey "along the unknown coast", as depicted in the second rune, is an excellent symbol for the mysterious unfolding of the creative process. For those who cannot undertake such a journey, there is nothing but a superficial life of "perpetual sunshine" where "little violet mandolins" sprout from the dry-docked ship's masts. These "mandolins" suggest extrinsic ornamentation as opposed to the organic integrations of a poem's form and content. If the journey is to be more than a safe and superficial tour of the harbour, the poet must know his tools, such as the viking "ship", metaphor for the poetic craft that abets the artist's voyage of discovery. Levertov writes:

I believe poets are instruments on which the
power of poetry plays.

But they are also makers, craftsmen (PIW, 3)

Levertov achieves a balanced view of the poet as both a receptive channel and an active artisan through her tolerance of the basic paradox in the discovery of organic form: that the poem is both a quasi-natural organism that grows spontaneously from the organic event and, also, a crafted work of art that has been directed toward foreseen ends. The

innate growth of organic form is, "paradoxically", directed by what Levertov calls:

the form sense or "traffic sense", as Stefan Wolpe speaks of it, is ever present along with (yes, paradoxically) fidelity to the revelations of meditation. The form sense is a sort of Stanislavsky of the imagination: putting a chair two feet downstage there, thickening a knot of bystanders upstage left, getting this actor to raise his voice a little and that actress to enter more slowly; all in the interest of a total form he intuit. (PIW, 12)

Levertov is capable of a double view. She is receptive to the innate revelations and, at the same time, is able to predict or intuit the emergent form and direct its plot. In the organic event, the intensity of the revelation has a plot or duration in time. Levertov speaks of the "total form" or "the whole" as having "units of awareness" that begin and end. "It usually happens that within the whole, that is between the point of crystallization that marks the beginning or onset of a poem and the point at which the intensity of contemplation has ceased, there are distinct units of awareness" (PIW, 10).

Levertov, then, seeks a balance between seeing the poem as an acquired, crafted art that is directed towards foreseen ends and as the spontaneous result of the discovery of form. But rather than make the rational mind responsible for adapting the parts to parts and blending such "units of awareness" into a cohesive plot that moves towards foreseen ends, Levertov sees the intuition as responsible for achieving the "total form". "Form sense" or "traffic sense" is another name for the intuitive or synthetic intelligence "deeply imbedded" beneath the foundations of the

rational mind.

Levertov goes on to describe the intuition as:

a sort of helicopter scout flying over the field of the poem, taking aerial photos and reporting on the state of the forests and its creatures -- or over the sea to watch for the schools of herring and direct the fishing fleet toward them. (PIW, 12)

Intuition is then seen as a faculty that provides an overview of emergent forms and ones that are not consciously impressed upon the poet's experience. It is described as having a range of abilities suggesting that it is a synthetic and integrating faculty. It receptively watches or scans the field, taking photographs or mental notes of perceptually intense moments, reports on the emerging story or plot of the poem and, finally, according to its premonitions, even directs the fragmentary parts together to form meaningful interrelations such that the fishing fleet makes its catch and the poet writes his poem.

Thus in the pre-verbal phase of the growth and discovery of organic form, the poet is Emerson's passive channel who can, as Levertov writes, only "contemplate" his experience until "there come to him the first words of the poem If he forces a beginning before this point, it won't work." But once "those forerunning words" rise "to the surface" (PIW, 8-9), and an intense, perceptual flow begins, the poet is both a channel for the further discovery of form and also an intuitive craftsman who can direct its course by way of his "form sense" or "traffic sense". This intuitive sense does not result in a consciously crafted work of art developed from a preconceived blueprint, nor does it impress forms upon experience. Rather it allows the

poet to make spontaneous adjustments in the poem's flow and form. It is a synthetic response to an evolving situation enabling the artist to act holistically such that all his faculties are called into play. Thus the poet continuously discovers and adjusts to his changing perceptions, " 'checking for accuracy', for (a) precision of language" (PIW, 9) that will verbally approximate and express such change. At the same time he is able to intuitively direct the poem's growth according to his premonitions of the emerging, "total form"; and, once the organic event has passed, the organic poet can, if not re-evoke, at least recollect and edit it in tranquility.

CHAPTER IV

THE WORK OF ART AS AN ORGANIC WHOLE

I. IMMIGRATING FROM EUROPE'S "WASTELAND" TO AMERICA AND
"THAT CRAZY BIRD"

In attempting to define Levertov's concept of the work of art, one is confronted with the fact that this concept changes as her literary career progresses. This attests to her vitality and potential for growth, although it makes difficult any other approach than that of a chronological study and comparison. But, in spite of such growth and change, continuity can be found in the fact that Levertov continues to deal with certain questions that are basic to organicism: determinism, inclusiveness, and the synthesis of form and content.

Levertov's literary career began in England in 1946 with the publication of The Double Image, her first collection of poems. I would like to contrast a representative poem from this collection with one from her first book published in North America in 1956, Here & Now, to show the change that occurred in her work during this formative transition. The two poems to be compared are "Christmas, 1944" from The Double Image and "The Bird" from Here & Now. "Christmas, 1944" is an occasional poem written during World War II:

Bright cards above the fire bring no friends near,
fire cannot keep the cold from seeping in.
Spindrift sparkle and candles on the tree
make brave pretence of light; but look out of doors:

Evening already surrounds the curtained house,
 draws near, watches;
 gardens are blue with frost, and every carol
 bears a burden of exile, a song of slaves.
 Come in, then, poverty, and come in, death:
 this year too many lie cold, or die in cold
 for any small room's warmth to keep you out.
 You sit in empty chairs, gleam in unseeing eyes;
 having no hope now, you cast your shadow
 over the atlas, and rest in the restlessness
 of our long nights as we lie, dreaming of Europe.

A painted bird or boat above the fire,
 a fire in the hearth, a candle in the dark,
 a dark excited tree, fresh from the forest,
 are all that stand between us and the wind.
 The wind has tales to tell of sea and city,
 a plague on many houses, fear knocking on the doors;
 how venom trickles from the open mouth of death,
 and trees are white with rage of alien battles.
 Who can be happy while the wind recounts
 its long sagas of sorrow? Though we are safe
 in a flickering circle of winter festival
 we dare not laugh; or if we laugh, we lie,
 hearing hatred crackle in the coal,
 the voice of treason, the voice of love.

(DI, 24)

Here, the metrical scheme varies from four to six stresses per line. Often each line expresses a complete thought or possesses both a subject and a verb. The diction is abstract and somewhat ponderous. The solemn tone is that of a Yeats, as in the line "a painted bird or boat . . .", or of an Eliot or Auden as with such phrases as "burden of exile", "brave pretence of light", "the restlessness/ of our long nights", "long sagas of sorrow", "as we lie, dreaming of Europe", or "your shadow/ over the atlas".

Levertov writes that in The Double Image she was involved extensively with "the conscious personification of abstractions" (PIW, 64),

a favorite technique of Auden's. Specifically in "Christmas, 1944", anthropomorphizations occur. The "evening . . . watches". The "wind" tells "tales". "Fear" is seen "knocking on doors". Like expected dinner guests, "poverty" and "death" are dramatically invited by Levertov to "Come in" and are given the human characteristics of eyes, shadows, and the ability to sit in chairs. And further, this poem lacks the vivid, visual imagery of Levertov's later poetry with the exception of the fact that "gardens are blue with frost" and that "the trees are white". Nevertheless, these trees are not white with snow, but with an abstract human emotion, that of the "rage of alien battles".

"The Bird", from Here & Now, is not a poem that reflects the "Wasteland" of a war-torn Europe as it might appear in the poetry of Eliot or Auden. Rather, it celebrates a bird and the freshness of a new world that is being built from "trucks full/ of pink bricks":

That crazy bird
always laughing -
he sits on the wall they are building,
the wall
which will hide the horizon,
and laughs like mad every time
we open our mouths to say
I love you I hate you etc.
He came only since
the green rain came and
softened everything, making
mud of the cracked
selfrespecting earth and rotting
the red flowers from their stems. Yes,
the rain, the trucks full
of pink bricks, that crazy
eavesdropping bird, came
together and finished
the days of burning, and silence, and distance.
(H&N, 24)

This poem is not an occasional poem written to commemorate a traditional event as is the recurrence of Christmas in the Christian calendar. Beginning with a demonstrative adjective, it points to an unrepeatable, organic event composed of "that crazy bird", "the green rain", "the red flowers", and "pink bricks" that "came together and finished". Here, the work of art is the means by which the artist perceives and determines this unique and singular constellation of perceptions.

Leverlov's desire to be engaged with everyday objects, such as "the bird", the "pink bricks", or the "rotting . . . red flowers", is in keeping with the organicist's desire for determinateness, a characteristic of the organic whole. That is, through precise observation, she is able to penetrate into the minute ramifications of things or facts. She seeks to clearly define and individualize her perceptions rather than to present them as vague, undefined or indefinite. This is because she believes that by becoming intimate with the minute ramifications of a thing, she will experience its universal essence. It does not matter that these facts are crude, everyday objects, for the organicist believes that all substances are part of the organic whole.

Leverlov's desire for organic economy also is on the increase. The lines of "The Bird" are much shorter than those of "Christmas, 1944", having generally only two or three stresses per line. These short lines often do not form a complete thought, but focus on a single word or

word-cluster. For example, the first two lines form a prepositional phrase that is left dangling.

Thus, in her early poetry, Levertov moves towards greater economy and determinateness but not towards greater inclusiveness. She admits that her early writing was "inadequately representative of my own feelings" (PIW, 67). Although its mood is optimistic and bright, "The Bird" is not a highly emotional poem, as it is primarily concerned with the sensations of the natural world. In fact, the presence of nature diminishes human emotion into insignificance. The "crazy bird" laughingly mocks the conclusive solemnity of such stylized emotions as "I love you I hate you, etc." that characterize the predictably ritualized world of "Christmas, 1944". She expresses an impatience with human talk over and against this vivid happening or randomly unpredictable coming together of "the rain, the trucks full of pink bricks, that crazy eavesdropping bird". And in "Christmas, 1944" although a broad range of human emotions are accepted, they are, nevertheless, abstractly depicted as fear, sorrow, hatred, or love and are somewhat philosophically considered in their relations to one another, but are not engaged in by the poet as real feelings.

The basic change, then, from The Double Image to Here & Now is an increase in organic economy and determinateness, but not in emotional inclusiveness. Levertov abandons the hauntingly vague and solemn language of her earliest verse for a more minimal and precise poetry that is particularized by vivid, natural details. Still abstractions and

vagueness occur, although juxtaposed with concrete, visual and aural perceptions. One senses that Levertov is not, as yet, completely at home in her new American style.

II. WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS AND "THE CRUDE SUBSTANCES OF DAILINESS"

Levertov writes that in the early 50's she fell under the formative influence of William Carlos Williams, who would have sympathized with her delight in the spontaneous messiness of "The Bird"'s random and material world:

William Carlos Williams became the most powerful influence on my poetry, and at that time, seeking as I was to engage my capacities as a poet with the crude substances of dailiness, as I had notably not done in the 1940s, I took as influence from Williams nothing of the profound mythic element we find (especially, not not only) in Paterson, but rather the sharp eye for the material world and the keen ear for the vernacular which characterize his earlier and shorter poems. My tendency was even to take at their face value some of his "anti-mystical" attitudes, and to adopt a kind of pragmatism not only inadequately representative of my own feeling but which Williams himself did not wholly or profoundly adhere to.

(PIW, 67)

It will be valuable to compare a poem from Levertov's third book, Overland to the Islands, which was published in 1958 with a poem from Sour Grapes, an early Williams collection published in 1938 as part of The Collected Earlier Poems, in order to illustrate the effect of his influence on her poetry. I will compare Levertov's "Merritt Parkway"

to the poem that follows, Williams' "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives":

Men with picked voices chant the names
of cities in a huge gallery: promises
that pull through descending stairways
to a deep rumbling.

The rubbing feet
of those coming to be carried quicken a
grey pavement into soft light that rocks
to and fro, under the domed ceiling,
across and across from pale
earthcolored walls of bare limestone.

Covertly the hands of a great clock
go round and round! Were they to
move quickly and at once the whole
secret would be out and the shuffling
of all ants be done forever.

A leaning pyramid of sunlight, narrowing
out at a high window, moves by the clock;
discordant hands straining out from
a center: inevitable postures infinitely
repeated -

two-two-four-two-eight!

Porters in red hats run on narrow platforms.

This way ma'am!

- important not to take
the wrong train!

Lights from the concrete
ceiling hang crooked but -

Poised horizontal
on glittering parallels the dingy cylinders
packed with a warm glow - inviting entry -
pull against the hour. But brakes can
hold a fixed posture till -

The whistle!

Not two-eight. Not two-four. Two!

Gliding windows. Colored cooks sweating
in a small kitchen. Taillights -

In time: twofour!
In time: twoeight!

- rivers are tunneled: trestles
cross oozy swampland: wheels repeating
the same gesture remain relatively
stationary: rails forever parallel
return on themselves infinitely.

The dance is sure.¹

Believing that "the serious poet has admitted the whole armamentarium of the industrial age to his poems", Williams, in "Overture", celebrated "a new spirit - a new Zeitgeist"² that of the modern mechanized world. He contrasted this contemporary subject matter with that found in the work of Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, and even Yeats that was "'poetic' and in many minds that is still poetry - and exclusively so - the 'beautiful' or pious (and so beautiful) wish expressed in beautiful language - a dream".³ He explained that even Auden's poems were "becoming old-fashioned" in their depiction of the industrial age as a "background of waste and destruction"⁴ rather than as modern reality to be explored and celebrated, as Williams was doing in "Overture".

Although Williams emphasized the use of a modern subject matter which, in "Overture", consists of the poet's perceptions of the frenetic

¹William Carlos Williams, "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives", The Collected Earlier Poems (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1951), pp. 194-195.

²Idem., "The Poem as a Field of Action", Selected Essays (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., New Directions Paperbook, 1969), p. 282.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

pace of modern, mechanized life, he did not believe that a poem should be wholly determined by its content. He wrote that when a poet devotes "himself to the subject matter of his poems, genre, he has come to the end of his poetic means".⁵ Instead, as we shall see, Williams not only considered the subject, but also the manner in which a poem was composed and, therefore, sought a synthesis of form and content. For example, "Overture" is not simply a documentary representation of or a poetic discourse on the nature of train stations, nor is it an imitation of the external world, but a "revelation" of the underlying structure of the poet's perceptions of the train station. Williams wrote that the aim of a poet was to achieve "an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that may constitute a revelation in the speech he uses".⁶ In the following passage from "Overture", Williams explored modern, mechanistic "forms common to experience so as not to frighten the onlooker but to

⁵ Ibid., p. 288.

⁶ Idem., quoted by Randall Jarrell, "Introduction", William Carlos Williams: Selected Poems (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., New Directions Paperbook, 1963), p. xvi.

invite him in".⁷ It was not the novelty of the poem's content that was concentrated upon, but the plastic and unifying movement of consciousness that, as we shall see, gives rise to such formal elements as language and diction or the patterning and placement of lines which, in the following passage, attempt to approximate the rhythmic movement of the perceptions, themselves:

Lights from the concrete
ceiling hang crooked but -
Poised horizontal
on glittering parallels the dingy cylinders
packed with a warm glow - inviting entry -
pull against the hour. But brakes can
hold a fixed posture till -

This passage is shaped by the movement of the poet's imagination as it attempts to determine the underlying forms and forces (inscape/ instress) of mechanistic objects that invite and "pull" against and "hold".

⁷William Carlos Williams took note of what he felt was the trend in modern art as reflected in the work of the cubist painter, Juan Gris, where "the attempt is being made to separate things of the imagination from life, and obviously, by using the forms common to experience so as not to frighten the onlooker away but to invite him . . . things with which he is familiar, simple things - at the same time to detach them from ordinary experience to the imagination. Thus they are still "real" they are the same things they would be if photographed or painted by Monet, they are recognizable as the things touched by the hands during the day, but . . . they are seen to be in some peculiar way - detached," from Spring and All, The Reader, ed. with an Introduction by M.L. Rosenthal (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., New Directions Paperbook, 1965), pp. 326-327.

Here the poet detaches such mechanistic shapes as "lights", "cylinders", or "brakes" from their everyday environment and brings them together to create a work of the imagination. In the work of art, itself, the poet's awareness or synthetic energy integrates with the potentially synthetic energy of the "things of the imagination"⁸ that can be found within the external phenomena of the everyday world.

The formal elements of the poem, as we shall see, result from and verbally approximate this plastic and unifying movement of consciousness as it integrates inner and outer reality. And the attempt to formulate and articulate this movement of consciousness leads to a discovery of further insights which, in turn, gives rise to additional formal elements in a progressive interaction of form and content that results in the completed poem. "Overture", then, records the process of Williams' consciousness as it synthesizes form and content into a revelation of artistic unity, found not in a poetically beautiful world, but amid the modern world of a mechanized train station.

The corollary to this notion of the synthesis of form and content that results from the unifying movement of consciousness is that there is no such thing as the same form with different content. For example, the style of "Overture" that sprang in part from Williams' perceptions of the ironically heavy, repetitive dance of the locomotives will not be like the style of other poems in which things other than dancing locomotives are

⁸ Ibid.

perceived by the specific individual, Williams, at a specific moment in time and space. Thus, he wanted a crafted notation that would clearly communicate his perceptions and at the same time allow him the necessary freedom of expression to accommodate the changing gaits and rhythms of each unique synthesis of form and content. He wrote that the modern poet should put aside the traditional poetic foot as it appears in the sonnet which "does not admit of the slightest structural change in its composition"⁹ and, instead, seek "a new measure or new way of measuring that will be commensurate with the social, economical world in which we are living".¹⁰

In his study of "Einstein's theory of relativity", he looked for ways of opening and loosening conventional poetic structures to incorporate the notion of "the relativity of measurements - into our own category of activity: the poem".¹¹ That is, he sought a unit of measure that would save his poetry from the disorder of free-verse and yet provide him with the freedom of expression that was both subtle enough to accommodate the relativity of each perceptual constellation and flexible enough to include the American idiom as an acceptable poetic style. He developed what Levertov refers to as "the idea of the variable foot, which is so difficult

⁹ Idem., "The Poem as a Field of Action", Selected Essays, p. 291.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 283.

¹¹ Ibid.

to understand", but is dependent upon:

a sense of a pulse, a pulse in behind the words, a pulse that is actually sort of tapped out by a drum in the poem. Yes, there's an implied beat, as in music; there is such a beat, and you can have in one bar just two notes, and in another bar ten notes, and yet the bar length is the same. I suppose that is what Williams was talking about, that you don't measure a foot in the old way by its syllables but by its beat.

(PIW, 22-23)

In this interdependence of form and content, the line was the basic unit of both measure and perception and was the agent primarily responsible for synthesizing the poem into a field or organic whole. Williams counted the line as a single, variable beat or foot. It varied because, as Levertov explains, its pulse "accelerates and slows" (PIW, 23) as in music where one bar can have anywhere from two to ten notes. This acceleration and deceleration grows innately from the slowing and increasing movement of the content of consciousness. And, ironically, this variable beat "has a regularity" (PIW, 23) or continuous pulse which generally results in a fairly short line. The line, itself, represents only one pulse of perception:

the pulse behind the bars is actually heard -
pum-pum But then, winding around that
pum-pum, it's going dee-dee-dee-dee, and so
forth. Well, I think perhaps in a poem you've
got that melody, and not the metronomic pum-pum;
but the pum-pum, pum-pum is implied.

(PIW, 23)

This suggests that there are varying spans of attention likened to the changing melody line (the dee-dee) of a piece of music which fluctuates

around a regular beat (the pum-pum) which is likened to a bar of music. Although it is not clear in either the writings of Levertov or Williams, it is possible that this regular beat could be that of the breath or the heart.

This composite and variable beat is the shaping force behind Williams' poetry. He developed a precise notation or means of recording this acceleration and deceleration of perception. This notation consisted of such formal elements as words and phrases and the pauses between them, the length and indentation of lines, and the textures and density of syllables forming a given line. In "Overture", for example, a wavelike meditative motion is created through the occasional omission of periods, as with the phrases - "ceiling hang crooked but -" or "hold a fixed posture till", and is sustained through the extensive use of enjambment to create a sensation of continuous physical movement as in the poem's last stanza:

-- rivers are tunneled: trestles
cross oozy swampland: wheels repeating
the same gesture remain relatively
stationary: rails forever parallel
return on themselves infinitely.

The dance is sure.

Verbally approximating his perceptions of the incessant, physical movement through the spacious station, Williams shaped "Overture" through his choice of words and diction. He used such phrases as "to and fro", "across and across", "round and round"; and action verbs such as "chant", "rocks", "move", "run", "pull", "cross", "return"; and employed participle

adjectives such as "descending", "rubbing", "coming", "straining", "inviting", "gliding", "sweating", or "repeating" to effect a suspension of time and space. And through his use of the variable foot, Williams was able to loosen "Overture"'s structure to include vernacularisms such as when the porters say: "This way ma'am/ - important not to take/ the wrong train!".

Line length and speed and such onomatopoetic sounds as the repeating i's and o's increase and then decrease and come closer together in the last two lines of this stanza:

Gliding windows. Colored cooks sweating
in a small kitchen. Taillights -
In time: twofour!
In time: twoeight!

The first line is a long pulse as Williams watched the long, gliding movement of a passing train's window. The line consists of two short phrases separated by a pause in perception until he suddenly saw black cooks working behind a continuum of "gliding windows". The second line is a shorter span of attention suggesting the cramped "small kitchen" and that Williams saw the train's taillights. And in the last two lines, the pulse shortens to a staccato beat: "In time: twofour!/ In time: twoeight!". For rather than running out as time did prior to a train's departure with the countdown: "Not twoeight. Not twofour. Two!", it reversed itself and increased. With this came a slight lengthening of the span of attention and, consequently, of the line and also a broader, more open vowel sound which shifts from "ou" to "a" to approximate the

increasing momentum of the train's moving away from the station.

I would like now to explore Levertov's "Merritt Parkway" to see how Williams has influenced her concept of a poem as a work of art, seen as a synthesis of form and content:

As if it were
forever that they move, that we
keep moving -

Under a wan sky where
as the lights went on a star
pierced the haze & now
follows steadily

a constant
above our six lanes
the dreamlike continuum ...

And the people-ourselves!
the humans from inside the
cars, apparent
only at gasoline stops
unsure,
eyeing each other

drink coffee hastily at the
slot machines & hurry
back to the cars
vanish
into them forever, to
keep moving-

Houses now & then beyond the
sealed road, the trees/trees, bushes
passing by, passing
the cars that
keep moving ahead of
us, past us, pressing behind us

and
over left, those that come
toward us shining too brightly
moving relentlessly

in six lanes, gliding

north & south, speeding with
a slurred sound -

(JL, 80-81)

Through her choice of words and diction, Levertov, in "Merritt Parkway", approximates the movement of her perceptions of the freeway. She uses action verbs such as "move", "pierced", "follows", "hurry", "vanish", and "come"; employs adverbs and phrases that point out movement within perceptual clusters such as "under", "above", "inside", "back to", "into", "beyond", "ahead of", "behind us", or "over left"; and uses such participle adjectives as "moving", "eyeing", "passing by", "pressing", "shining", "gliding", and "speeding". But, unlike Williams, she does not use American idioms, primarily because she does not wish to emphasize the "rhythms of the outer voice". Rather she believes that a poem should record the cadences "of the inner voice" whose vocabulary is not "identical with that which . . . is used in conversation" (PIW, 24). One wonders, too, if she does not shy away from "Williams' insistence upon the American idiom" (PIW, 24), because she herself is "straddled between places" (TSA, viii), that is between an English and American style.

Nevertheless, she does employ Williams' variable foot to shape the content of "Merritt Parkway", which consists of her perceptions of the jarring tempos of a dehumanized suburban landscape. For example, no periods occur to break the perceptual flow, and both enjambment and incomplete phrases lacking either a subject or verb create a rapidity of movement. Here, phrase overlaps phrase to effect the continuous

passage of "speeding" cars:

in six lanes, gliding
north & south, speeding with
a slurred sound -

And, line breaks indicate what Levertov calls "expressive pauses":

I regard the end of a line, the line break, as roughly equivalent to half a comma, but what that pause is doing is recording nonsyntactic hesitations, or waitings, that occur in the thinking-feeling process.¹²

Line breaks emphasize that "one doesn't really know what the next word that one is going to say will be".¹³ Such hesitations appear in stanza three of "Merritt Parkway" where line breaks occur after the words "stops" and "unsure". Both break the flow into the tensely spasmodic rhythms of stranger meeting stranger and suggest that the poet, herself, is "unsure" of what the next perception or gesture will be in this uncomfortable situation.

Line speed accelerates and decelerates in correspondence with the changing pace of perception to evidence a further interdependence of form and content.. Levertov does this both through the length of lines and through "the kind of syllables, and whether the consonants are sufficiently harder to enunciate, so that they help to slow things

¹² Denise Levertov, "Craft Interview", The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from the New York Quarterly, ed. by William Packard (New York: Doubleday & Co. for The New York Quarterly Poetry Review Foundation, Inc., 1970), pp. 88-89.

¹³ Ibid., 89.

down, too."¹⁴ In "Merritt Parkway", the line speed and the tempo of perceptions increase in the poem's last two stanzas, where traffic speeds up after the coffee break sequence. Here, Levertov uses fairly long lines with polysyllabic words which brings about "a sort of fast, rippling movement".¹⁵ Also the letter s is repeated some 26 times in the last two stanzas to effect the aural sensation of "speeding with/ a slurred sound".

Furthermore, line indentation is used to show movement within perceptual clusters. In the following stanza, where each line extends beyond the preceding one towards the left margin, such indentation visually parallels Levertov's perception of people furtively scurrying away towards the left and back to their cars:

drink coffee hastily at the
slot machines & hurry
back to the cars

Unlike the sonneteer who knows precisely where he is going, Levertov discards all predetermined, metrical patterns and their suggestion of the "beautiful" symmetry and similitude of experience to "discover" the often asymmetric "truths" of contemporary life. For her, as for Williams, each poem is unlike any other in that it possesses a singular integration of form and content and represents an event, unlike any other, that occurs when a particular individual, the poet,

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁵ Ibid.

perceives from a unique perspective in time and space a singular coming together of experience. And in "Merritt Parkway", Levertov is able to communicate clearly the formal structure of its unique inscape through her use of a precise notation, largely inherited from Williams and composed of line breaks, indentations, enjambment, and the textures of varying consonant and vowel sounds, all of which allow her to express a patterning of fast and slow tempos and the sounds and silence that characterize each random, perceptual constellation.

Not only does Levertov feel certain there is no such thing as the same form with different content, she also believes in the Romantic hypothesis found in the works of Coleridge and Wordsworth and echoed in the poetry of Williams -- that form results from the plastic and unifying movement of consciousness. In "Merritt Parkway", as in "Overture", the imagination determines, detaches, and resynthesizes the poet's perceptions to form the work of art. For example, it determines such physical sensations and objects as "wan sky", "lights", "a star", "coffee", "slot machines", "moving ahead", "pressing behind", or "gliding" and the "slurred", aural sensation of riding in a car. Further, this synthetic imagination, working not in the beautiful world of Keats or Tennyson, but in a modern context, detaches such everyday objects as cars, cups of coffee, and slot machines from the environment to bring them together to create a poem that expresses contemporary experience. In the following it suspends and isolates mechanical objects and the human activities surrounding them in order to accentuate kinetic interrelationships.

drink coffee hastily at the
 slot machines & hurry
 back to the cars
 vanish
 into them forever, to
 keep moving -

The first line isolates the frenetic activity of those who "drink coffee hastily", as does the second line that aligns "hurry" and the world of "machines". The word "vanish" is isolated in a line of its own to dramatically emphasize the sudden and seemingly final disappearance of people into their cars. Here, human continuity is virtually impossible in a rapidly changing, mechanized landscape, whose only property is "to/keep moving".

Thus, in both "Merritt Parkway" and "Overture", the form is shaped by the movement of consciousness seen as determining and detaching the poet's perceptions of an everyday environment from his experience to resynthesize them into a work of art. And in both poems, the variable foot provides the means to ensure that there will be no such thing as the same form with different content, but rather a different form, content, and especially emotional tone. Williams was celebrating and Levertov protesting against, modern, industrial society. Williams delighted in determining the impressiveness and force of the mechanized world. Levertov, on the other hand, shows man as dominated and driven by this mechanized force and as existing in a dreamlike somnambulism that is punctured by a momentary awareness of human paranoia and isolation. In "Merritt Parkway" she makes efforts through the writing of the poem

itself both to wake up and to personalize the dehumanized landscape. She corrects herself changing "they" to "we" and writing: "The people-ourselves! / the humans"

Nevertheless, in "Merritt Parkway", Levertov leaves behind "Christmas, 1944"'s "background of waste and destruction" and abandons the confines of her "curtained house" with its "safe" and "flickering circle of winter festival", and joins the freeway's "dreamlike continuum" to move "relentlessly" with the modern world. And, although the romantically "poetic" beauty of "spindrift sparkle and candles" and ritual have been given up, beauty and stability can still be found in nature, if only momentarily, as Levertov catches a glimpse of the evening star that "pierced the haze and now / follows steadily / a constant". But it is largely eclipsed by "Merritt Parkway"'s new, industrial foreground where civilized, and meaningful human communication is dominated, if not completely destroyed, by the mechanized force that is "speeding with / a slurred sound -".

In spite of the difference between the emotional tone of "Overture" and "Merritt Parkway", neither are highly emotional poems, but consist primarily of external sensations, as has already been shown, and the occasional concept or idea such as Williams' musing on the secret passage of time which if it were to "move quickly and at once . . . the shuffling / of all ants (would) be done forever." And likewise, Levertov begins "Merritt Parkway" not with an emotional passage, but with the idea that modern society is "forever" in motion. Thus, although Williams wrote that a poem should express a poet's "perceptions and ardors", and Levertov states

that above all she seeks the "emotional tone . . . (or) texture" (PIW, 11) of an experience, both feel that an excess of intellection and emotion destroy perception. Instead they aim in their writing to achieve organic economy where anything that would distort the perceptual flow, or disrupt the integration of form and content, is pared away. In "Overture" and "Merritt Parkway", external sensations are preferred to concepts or ideas which are, in turn, preferred over passions and ardours; and, of course, metrical ornamentation is entirely avoided.

Drawing their images more and more from a man-made world, Williams and Levertov explore this notion of organic economy through metaphors that evidence a transition from nineteenth to twentieth century organicism. In this transition, the poem is a living organism become an artifact or humanly constructed object. But, whether they use Coleridge's botanical metaphor or that of a man-made object, both Williams and Levertov express the same notion of an organic unity of form and content that has been pared away of all decorative or expressive excess.

Being tough and progressive and trying to sound like a modern architect, Williams wrote:

A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words. When I say there's nothing sentimental about a poem I mean that there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant . . . 16

¹⁶ Williams, quoted by Jarrell, "Introduction", Williams: Selected Poems, p. xvi.

In this analogy, Williams wanted the work of art to be pared away of its surrounding shell of decorum and of all intellectual and, especially, emotional excess. There should be "nothing sentimental about" it. Rather, the work of art should possess the tremendous vitality and structural precision of such a modern machine as, for example, a locomotive where all its parts function together as a whole.

In certain poems Levertov uses natural objects to suggest that the work of art should impress its audience with an innate structural wholeness and organic economy. In "A Common Ground", she describes the poet as "planting the vegetable words", which grow through the creative process, into words possessing a "sweet" and nourishing vitality that the reader can "crunch on" (JL, 1). Here, the work of art is likened, not to a beautiful and decorative flower, but to its more mundane and practical cousin, the vegetable, to suggest that a poem is most palatable and nourishing when it is pared away of excessive, metrical decoration and of all sentimentality.

At other times Levertov uses man-made objects as metaphors for the work of art as in the "Preface" of To Stay Alive where:

the artist as craftsman is engaged in making discrete and autonomous works - each of which, like a chair or a table, will have, as Ezra Pound said, the requisite number of legs and not wobble

(TSA, vii)

A poem's structure, then, should be like that of a table's which holds up and is sound and suitable to what it presents. The functional soundness

of the table, for example, is preferable to the Victorian bric-a-brac that might be placed on it which suggests that a poem should be "discrete" in its avoidance of the regular filigree of repetitious metrics and excessive emotions. Instead it should be "autonomous" and as:

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
(JL, 87).

Like the table analogy, the birds represent a directness and economy of expression where they simply make their message and that is that. And through the use of such metaphors as the hardness of a well built floor or the soundness of a well crafted bench, Levertov again suggests that the artist should plane away all emotional and metrical excess from the work of art until he achieves a functional integration of form and content.

Coming under the influence of Williams' early poetry, Levertov, in her early writing, strives for organic economy, as he did, and sees it as a characteristic of the organic integration of form and content. She also subscribes to his idea that there is no such thing as the same form with different content and, as he did, abandons formal verse structures, such as the sonnet with its traditional foot, for the highly flexible, variable foot which provides her with both a precise method of notation and also the necessary freedom to express each unique synthesis of form and content. And further, she believes, as did Williams, that

this formal unit or variable foot arises from the plastic and unifying movement of consciousness seen as exploring and integrating it with the surrounding, modern environment. For the work of art is not only likened to a well crafted table, bench, or floor, but is also described as being as "mysterious as the silence when the tailor/ would pause . . .", that is, as mysterious as the movement of the imaginative force that shapes it.

And, in the following metaphor another criterion is added to those standards such as determinism, inclusiveness, economy, and the synthesis of form and content governing the organic work of art -- that it can serve as a memorial for the "robust" spirit of the imagination:

Our lives flower and pass. Only robust
works of the imagination live in eternity,
Tlaloc, Apollo,
dug out alive from dead cities.

And the austere coin
a tractor turns up in a
building site
reveals an emperor.

(WEBB, 72)

These dug-up coins and "works of the imagination" survive, if only by chance, as the "soul" or form of these "dead cities". Thus, the work of art possesses the potential not only for the expression but the eternalization of the "robust", living spirit of its times. And in "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives" and "Merritt Parkway", it is this "new spirit" or "Zeitgeist" of the industrial age that both Williams and Levertov are attempting to memorialize.

III. "THOSE WHO DARE" OPEN THE FORM

We have seen how Williams' early poetry influenced the early poetry and aesthetics of Levertov and how the transition from The Double Image to Here & Now or to Overland to the Islands resulted in a poetry of greater organic determinateness and economy, but one that is lacking in emotional inclusiveness. I would now like to look at a later work, To Stay Alive (1965), to see how the persona of these poems appears much more "as an inscape of emotion, of feeling" (PIW, 11) than it did in her earlier poetry. And, as To Stay Alive is Levertov's one attempt at writing a long poem similar to Williams' Paterson, Pound's Cantos, Duncan's The Opening of the Field, or Olson's Maximus, I would like to see how successful it is in achieving both organic inclusiveness and cohesiveness.

To Stay Alive is an example of an artistic work as an "open form". This term, originating in physics, was used by the gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Kohler to describe systems that "absorb or emit energy in commerce with other parts of the world".¹⁷ Robert Duncan has written certain aesthetic statements on "open form". Like Kohler, he sees "open form" as one that "lives and breathes in an exchange with an environment".¹⁸

¹⁷ Wolfgang Kohler, The Place of Value in a World of Facts (New York: Liveright Publishing Corp., 1938), p. 304.

¹⁸ Robert Duncan, "Preface (1972): The Hint of an Infinite Regression", Caesar's Gate: Poems 1949-50 (n.p.: Sand Dollar Press, 1972), p. xxxviii.

Leverťov, similarly, writes of the artist as involved in a continuous interchange or "Gestalt of his life (his work)/ his work (his life)" (TSA, vii). This is suggestive of Williams' desire to break down all existent barriers between art and life, thereby liberating the work of art from the confines of a traditionally beautiful vision and opening it to the possibilities of depicting all aspects of contemporary life. When Leverťov describes the work of art as an "open form" or "gestalt", she is hoping to open it to include all her interests. Specifically, she wants to include her political convictions and her involvement in the anti-Vietnam War movement. She is struggling to synthesize poetry and politics for:

... when their rhythms
mesh
then though the pain of living
never lets up

the singing begins.
(TSA, 74)

In her early poetry, Leverťov was a miniaturist who isolated objects in order that she might contemplate a momentary epiphany or revelation, but in To Stay Alive she "opens" the boundaries of the work of art and sets out to write a long poem that will encompass more than a decade of her life. It is described as "a document of some historical value, a record of one person's inner/ outer experience in America during the 60's and the beginning of the 70's" (TSA, ix). Exactly how "open", then is To Stay Alive, that is, how successfully does it reflect the multiple aspects of this historical period and, at the same time, create a continuing interchange between internal and external reality?

To Stay Alive, both as a work of art and as a historical document, is restricted by the fact that it is concerned with "one person's" perspective. This perspective is limited by Levertov's commitment as a political activist to oppose American capitalism and the Vietnam War. It does not include, for example, an objective spokesman from the American, political right. Consequently, it is not adequately inclusive of the multiple voices or aspects of the 60's and early 70's. But given its limitations as a historical document, To Stay Alive does record the life and times of one, somewhat representative, American intellectual and political leftist. Included are descriptions of food co-ops, rent strikes, titles of pop songs, political pamphlets, letters, newspaper clippings, even the logo of a political button, and the following, racially sensitive description of an anti-war demonstration:

Beyond the scaffolding set up for
TV cameras, a long way
from where I sit among 100,000 reddening
white faces,

is a big wooden cross:

and strapped upon it, turning
his head from side to side in pain
in the 90-degree shadeless Washington midafternoon
May 9th, 1970,

a young black man.

(TSA, 58)

There are portraits of Vietnamese and American soldiers and of
flower children such as the following:

Chuck Matthei
travels the country

a harbinger.

(He's 20. His golden beard was pulled and clipped
by a Wyoming sheriff, but no doubt has grown
again
though he can't grow knocked-out teeth.
He wears sneakers even in winter,
to avoid animal-hide; etc.)

(TSA, 41)

Although To Stay Alive is primarily concerned with documenting
leftist, political activities, other aspects of contemporary life are
cited such as a scientific article on the energy field or aura and
Levertov's experiences of jet travel and of Caribbean and European
vacations. And as a true disciple of Williams, she acknowledges the
natural world and its weather:

hemlock and cedar a toneless black,
snowtufted trunks and boughs
black, sky white, birches
whiter, snow
infinitely whiter: all things
muted; deprived
of color, as if
color were utterance.
A terror
as of eclipse.
The whites graying.

(TSA, 38)

This dark and threatening snowscape is used by Levertov as a
metaphor for the American political climate. It serves as a good example
of Levertov's ability to synthesize both poetry and politics and inner and
outer reality. This landscape is possessed by a violence that is political
as well as meteorological. And as Levertov feels its "terror/ as of
eclipse"; it is also a landscape of psychological violence. Throughout

To Stay Alive's decade of political activism, she continues to achieve this interaction of politics and psychology by describing her emotional reactions to the prevailing political climate. A range of emotions are in evidence such as "disasters numb within us" (TSA, 13), or as a great despair characterized by being "heavy, heavy, heavy, hand and heart/ We are at war" (TSA, 17), or as a shared supportiveness felt between fellow resisters who take "pleasure/ in each other's warmth" (TSA, 25), and finally as a "cramp/ of fury" (TSA, 25) that is provoked by the "war-makers" (TSA, 25) and by the indifference of the silent majority. Further, Levertov uses her poetry as a means of coming to terms with the guilt she feels upon leaving the anti-war struggle for a soothing, Caribbean vacation.

As a "record of one person's inner/ outer experience" (TSA, ix), To Stay Alive not only includes Levertov's emotional reactions to political events, but also shows that some of her most intimate relationships had political overtones. She begins To Stay Alive by exploring her feelings of respect, rivalry, and distrust felt for her difficult sister Olga, who "wanted to browbeat/ the poor into joy's/ socialist republic" (TSA, 4). In the following passage, written after Olga's early death, a political rally takes on a deeply personal tone. It is haunted by Olga's voice, as Levertov seemingly relives her sister's funeral in imagining that she sees Olga, "limp and ardent" and nearly dead, being "shoved in" to a "paddywagon" that "gapes" like a hearse or tomb:

Your high soprano
sings out from just
in back of me -

We shall - overcome

the paddywagon
gapes. - It seems
you that is lifted

limp and ardent
off the dark snow
and shoved in, and driven away.

(TSA, 11-12)

Levertov does not always attempt to merge her political concerns with her personal feelings such that they create layers of meaning as with the snowscape metaphor or with the Olga poem. At other times "inner/outer experience" parallel each other as when pamphlets and newspaper clippings that document outer, political reality are interspersed with passages that are largely confessional in nature. In the following passage, Levertov responds despairingly to a personal crisis, the suicide of a friend:

Dry mouth,
dry nostrils.
Dry sobs, beginning
abruptly, continuing
briefly,
ending.

The heart
dragging back sand through steelblue veins,
scraping it back out into the arteries: and they take it.
Living in the gray desert and
getting used to it.

(TSA, 79)

Levertov also uses dream materials thereby contrasting inner and outer worlds, as, for example, with the following dream:

Bet said:
 There was a dream I dreamed always
 over and over;

a tunnel
 and I in it, distraught

and great dogs blocking
 each end of it

and I thought I must
 always go on
 dreaming that dream,
 trapped there,

.....

And Bet said to me:
 Get down into your well,

it's your well

go deep into it

into your own depth as into a poem.

(TSA, 71-72)

Levertov's friend Bet urges her to explore her emotions more fully saying: "get down into your well . . . your own depth, as into a poem." But, ironically, this dream or vision of inner reality is Bet's and not Levertov's. In To Stay Alive, as in much of her poetry written in the late 60's and early 70's, Levertov is expressing her emotions more fully than in her earliest poetry. Nevertheless, although she has loosened and lengthened To Stay Alive's structure to accommodate her emotions, psychological insights, and political convictions, her voice still lacks confidence in its own perceptions. It often prefers to quote the dreams and intellectual opinions of others (there are some nineteen footnotes in To Stay Alive), or record the physical facts of the natural world, but falls

short of synthesizing these perceptions into a voice of her own.

The value of anything, an organicist would claim, is proportionate to the degree of integration it has attained. How successfully integrated, then, is To Stay Alive as an artistic whole? It is unified by Levertov's use of the variable foot, the underlying formal element that shapes it into an organic field or gestalt. Characterized by a rapidity of movement, the variable foot enables Levertov to pass quickly from inner to outer reality, from personal feelings to political dogma and back in a way that creates an experience of life in the round. Organic unity is also achieved through the use of a highly personal voice in such a way that one senses, even when reading a manifesto or newspaper clipping, that Levertov is leaning over your shoulder, reading it with you.

But, what To Stay Alive lacks is a strong developmental sense. It does not portray the evolution of political events and, thus, fails as a historical document. Although certain poems and journal entries are dated and arranged chronologically, there seems to be no inner or outer development during the decade or more it encompasses. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that as an organicist, Levertov is not interested in a chronological structure, but in a vivid portrayal of the present, moment to moment. And in To Stay Alive, this ongoing present appears as a struggle where neither political nor personal conflicts have been resolved. At the close of this long poem, Levertov praises those who "dare/ to struggle", "dare" to live:

- what I hold fast to, grip
in my fist for amulet, is my love
of those who dare, who do dare
to struggle, dare to reject
unlived life, disdain
to die of that.

(TSA, 83)

Daring to live, as we shall see, is the underlying thematic source for the movement and coherence of the poem in which life is conceived of as a series of moments of struggle that exist, not as a chronology, but in the now of "present history" (TSA, 66).

Unity is, thus, achieved thematically, as for example, through the inclusion of political and intellectual ideas such as those of Albert Schweitzer, José Yglesias, Father Dan Berrigan, Mahatma Gandhi, and A.J. Musti. But at times, Levertov can be faulted for an overly melodramatic handling of political rhetoric. This can be seen in the following, negative stereotype of an American G.I. in Vietnam:

You who go out on schedule
to kill, do you know
there are eyes that watch you,
eyes whose lids you burned off,
that see you eat your steak
and buy your girlflesh
and sell your PX goods

(TSA, 18)

This piece of political rhetoric portrays the Vietnamese as a faultless and peace loving people:

- 1) Did the people of Vietnam
use lanterns of stone?
- 2) Did they hold ceremonies
to reverence the opening of buds?
- 3) Were they inclined to quiet laughter?

.....

- 1) Sir, their light hearts turned to stone.
It is not remembered whether in gardens
stone lanterns illumined pleasant ways.
- 2) Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom,
but after the children were killed
there were no more buds.
- 3) Sir, laughter is bitter to the burnt mouth.

(TSA, 15)

Such political rhetoric and stereotyping contribute to a basic conflict in To Stay Alive and in Levertov's poetry in general -- that which exists between her aesthetic quietism and her political activism. Often, when it comes to politics, Levertov lacks the "negative capability" that would allow her to rest in a state of uncertainty, as her aesthetic quietism would have her do, until she could achieve fresh insights and feel compassion for her surrounding environment. Instead, as with the passages that were just quoted, she identifies too strongly with her political preconceptions and is not able to perceive objectively these individuals who are caught up in the political crises of their times.

Not only do her political preconceptions block the process of poetry, but her poetic diction often is not suitable to communicate these convictions to her American contemporaries. Levertov is the first to admit that:

I choose
 revolution by my words
often already don't reach forward
 into it -

.....

My diction marks me
untrue to my time;
change it, I'd be
untrue to myself.

(TSA, 34-35)

She goes on to explain that her choice of diction is often similar to that found in English Romantic poetry:

The "Ode to a Nightingale" was the first and only poem I ever learned by heart. Thus, when I wrote, translating "purged of legend", the reader's thought was of Stalin, while my intention was something more graphic than the literal "cured" -

(PIW, 34)

Thus, although the inclusion of political materials creates thematic unity, Levertov's Romantic diction and her political dogma both act to prevent the synthesis of poetry and politics.

Nevertheless, unity is achieved through one theme in particular -- that of Levertov's daring to live. Like the variable foot or underlying formal unit this theme, above all else, is responsible for To Stay Alive's movement and coherence, and, with the variable foot, forms a synthesis of form and content, of poetry and politics. Levertov quotes Albert Schweitzer and then Rainer Maria Rilke as saying:

Life that
wants to live.

(Unlived life
of which one can die.)
(TSA, 29)

This becomes translated for her into a question of "revolution or death" (TSA, 29), and it is very clear that she chooses the former. Daring to live is expressed as a will to survive and struggle for a political cause. It is contrasted with the isolation and dissatisfaction of a friend who dies of an illness, but the real cause of his death was that "life/ failed him in some way long before death" (TSA, 32).

Thus, daring to live and respect life becomes the primary value that underlies Levertov's pacifism and her political commitment to the anti-war struggle. It becomes the universal theme, making To Stay Alive "transcend the peculiar details of each life" (TSA, ix), such that Levertov's awareness of war and death and her daring to confront them and live are reflected not only in her political concerns, but also in the elegiac tone of many of the more confessional passages:

Is there anything
I write any more that is not
elegy?

(TSA, 33)

Meditating on the recent death of her sister and her father, she again and again reminds herself of human mortality and that she should live fully her own allotted time:

Trying one corner after another
to flag down a cab

at last unthinking as one at last
seems to see me,

I run into the traffic -

screech of brakes,
human scream, mine
anger of drivers and shocked pedestrians
yelling at me!

Is that how death is,
that poor, that trivial? I'm
not even frightened, only ashamed,
the driver almost refusing me,
scolding me half the way to the airport, I
strenuous to convince him I'm not
a habitual public danger.
So close to death and thinking only
of being forgiven by strangers.

(TSA, 31)

Not only does Levertov try to understand human death, but also in

this sensitive portrait of death in miniature, she acknowledges its meaning and drama in the natural world:

A fly I thought was dead
on its back on the windowsill,
grayed, shrivelled,

slowly waves.

Yes, what would be its right arm
dreamily moves-out-in-out again
twice, three times.

It seems
flies dream in dying.

(TSA, 37)

Thus, what finally universalizes To Stay Alive above all else is Levertov's contemplation of death out of which comes her daring to live and freshly perceive each "never-to-be-seen-again", momentary constellation of perceptions:

but life is in me, a love for
what happens, for
the surfaces that are their own
interior life, yes, the
Zen buildings! the
passing of the
never-to-be-seen-again
faces!

(TSA, 66)

Overall, the basic shift from the earlier poetry to To Stay Alive is that Levertov has opened its formal structure, loosening and lengthening it to encompass a decade of political activism. Although To Stay Alive fails as an objective, historical document, it often succeeds as a personal history and as an organic synthesis of poetry and politics. When this occurs Levertov exclaims that "the singing begins". But when it fails, subject matter becomes more important than the movement of the imagination that gives rise to an integration of form and content. And

as Williams warned, when the poet devotes "himself to the subject matter of his poems, genre, he has come to the end of his poetic means". In Levertov's case, political preconceptions often act to block the creative process by inhibiting the ability to perceive what is and result in mere rhetoric and stereotyping rather than in an imaginative work of art.

There is more emotional inclusiveness in To Stay Alive, than in the earlier poetry although, at times, Levertov lacks confidence in her own perceptions and turns to quote the dreams and ideas of others. Nevertheless, in To Stay Alive, she more than adequately develops a relationship between inner and outer reality and, thus, largely fulfills the organicist's demand for inclusiveness. Further, what remains from her apprenticeship with Williams are his emphasis on organic determinateness and economy and his variable foot which is the basic technique used to structure this rapidly moving collage of personal and political materials into a unique synthesis of form and content.

CONCLUSION

Admittedly Levertov's poetics of organic form is a largely derivative theory whose major aesthetic statement bears the humble title of "Some Notes on Organic Form", suggesting something of a casual, sketchy nature. But that these "Notes" have "been several times reprinted" (PIW, vii) shows that they are not without significance. Throughout The Poet in the World, however, Levertov draws her vocabulary from Romantic, Victorian, and early twentieth century American poetics and from late nineteenth and early twentieth century science and psychology. The question, then, is does she succeed in integrating these influences into a significant and contemporary system of her own?

The psychological process that underlies Levertov's poetics has changed little from that that appeared in the writings of Coleridge and Wordsworth. This attests to the fact that she has built her system upon an awareness of the psychology of human creativity that has been passed on through a literary tradition. For example, as Abrams pointed out, the conversion experience, as it is explained in Chapter II of this thesis is as old if not older than the Bible. And, not only does Levertov believe, as did Coleridge, that the creative process begins from a seminal and psychologically holistic state, but also that the basic task of the artist within the creative act involves cultivating a presence of mind that is both receptive and reverential. In so doing, the poet develops a method of "apperception", a modern, psychological term used by Levertov to reexpress that act that is so prevalent in the poetry of Wordsworth, the

act of observing one's perceptions of life closely and with affection, of being aware of what is. This results in a heightened sense of seeing and hearing, allowing the poet, through John Keats' "negative capability", to become intensely receptive to the wonder and mystery of quotidian existence.

Using twentieth-century, scientific terms to reexpress nineteenth-century organicism, Levertov integrates the Romantic theories that describe the artist's role within the creative process and those describing the conditions that govern the process, itself, into her poetics of organic form. And, by so doing, she bases her writing on a universal, or at least traditional, view of the psychology of creativity. Thus, what is most derivative about her poetics, her use of these Romantic theories of process, is what offers the most potential for providing her with the psychological insights on which to base a poetics and significant body of poetry.

Levertov's cultivation of Keats' "negative capability" enables her to be highly tolerant of the paradox that occurs in her own poetics -- that a poem is both a quasi-natural organism that grows spontaneously from the organic event and also a crafted work of art that has been directed toward foreseen ends. In this double view, Levertov is important in that she seeks a balance between Coleridge who viewed the poem as directed, for the most part, by a rational "surview"¹ and Emerson who saw a poem largely as a

¹Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, The Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. with Introduction by Donald A. Stauffer (New York: Random House, Inc., The Modern Library, 1951), p. 294.

product of the unconscious mind. Levertov then, as a true organicist, seeks to include the activities of both the conscious and unconscious mind in her theory of process. Achieving a balanced view of the poet as both a receptive channel and an active artisan, she differs from such Romantics as Coleridge and Emerson, who hold to more extreme positions. And, as one might expect, such a balanced and moderate view, as is Levertov's poetics of organic form, is one that gives primary importance to the intuition, that human faculty responsible for achieving psychological balance and integration. Thus, Levertov's poetics is valuable in that it ascribes importance to the intuition seen as the primary poetic faculty that synthesizes all aspects of the human psyche, be they conscious or unconscious, and thereby enables the poet to respond holistically to the rapidly changing, organic event.

Levertov also differs from the Romantics not in her concept of the work of art seen as an organic whole that results from the plastic and unifying movement of consciousness, but in her choice of the techniques used to organize the raw materials of perception into such a complexly integrated whole. She abandons traditional metrical schemes for Williams' variable foot which results in a rapidly moving and compressed poetry characterized by a strong and flexible line and sense of flow. In her adaptation of the variable foot, Levertov finds a poetic technique that is subtle enough to allow her to express the individual rhythms of her own voice. For it is with this notion of a poetic voice that Levertov's theories and poetry are the most original in their divergence from those of the early Williams,

with his emphasis on the American idiom and the spoken voice. Levertov, instead, feels that the work of art should approximate not the rhythms of the outer voice and breath, but those of the patterns of sound and silence that characterize the inner voice. This results in a poetry that is often characterized by a diction similar to that found in English Romantic and Victorian verse, which one must assume is the diction of Levertov's "inner song".

Following the precedent set by Williams in Paterson Levertov opens the work of art to a contemporary subject matter that includes all aspects of her life and interests spanning a decade or more of history. Here again, she adapts another highly flexible principle, the notion of an "open form", to her own ends. Unlike Williams, Levertov opens the work of art to include her political activism. At times in To Stay Alive, she is highly successful in her synthesis of poetry and politics, while at other times the predominance of political dogma blocks and inhibits the creative process and results in one-dimensional stereotyping and rhetoric rather than in poetry. But overall, she manages to sustain an ongoing intensity in her verse, seen in To Stay Alive as a continuous struggle in the now of present history that hovers rather than ends conclusively at the poem's end, through her use of the rapidly moving variable foot and through her ability to pare away any excess of intellection and emotions until what remains is the essential constellation of perceptions.

In opening the subject matter of her poetry to include all aspects of contemporary life, Levertov abandons the curtailed safety of "Christmas,

1944"'s beautiful vision and its "background of waste and destruction" and allows the "armamentarium of the industrial age" sometimes to appear as the foreground of her verse. She would not agree, however, with Williams' statement that beauty is "truth incompletely realized"², as she could not join with him to perceive objectively the robust spirit of the mechanized age. Instead the subject matter of many of her poems reflects a conflict that is inherent in the organic theory itself, that existing between appearance and reality, between what is actually perceived and what is believed to be the beautiful ideal. And in this use of subject matter, she is closer to Robert Duncan who yearns after a vision of the universe seen as a beautiful, ordered whole, than to Williams³, who wants only to perceive the truth of what is. But unlike Duncan, who conceives of this order as an occult hierarchy, Levertov is grounded in the natural world where she longs to experience an empathic rapport with life perceived in its ideal beauty as an immanent reality of interrelationships rather than as a transcendence.

The poet and critic, Josephine Miles, writes that beauty is a term whose major use comes "in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as a result of one love of goodness and truth, that is the love of the God of

²William Carlos Williams, "A Note on the Recent Work of James Joyce", Selected Essays (n.p.: Random House, 1954; reprint ed., New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., New Directions Paperbook, 1969), p. 75.

nature".³ This is exactly how Levertov uses beauty, as a value placed on the natural world, which is worshipped as one would worship a god. Levertov's poetics, then, are significant in that they offer religious values, not in the sense of an orthodox religious worship, but that they give value to what is, perhaps, a basic experience from which religions originally sprang -- that of a man coming face to face with the beautiful facts of the natural world without any intervening hierarchy to buffer or reinterpret this highly personal, organic event for him.

Unlike Williams, Levertov often feels that she must not only celebrate, but protect such ideal beauty, which most often appears as ephemerally illuminated, natural facts that are isolated in the midst of a highly threatening world, be it that of an England battered by the air raids of World War II or that of a darkly violent America seen as eclipsed by the Vietnam War. These natural epiphanies are rarely synthesized with the darker aspects that surround them, but appear for a moment and in spite of an often impersonal and threatening foreground, as does the beautiful evening star in "Merritt Parkway" and as does the bird whose delicate song is experienced between claps of thunder in "The Singer". Thus, Levertov's poetics of organic form is worthwhile in that it offers a methodology that allows her, in the midst of a dark and often threatening world, to continue her struggle toward and to point-out protectively the occasional revelation of an isolated and yet numinous, natural fact or group of such facts that

³ Josephine Miles, "Artists on Art: Values in Language; or, Where Have Goodness, Truth, and Beauty Gone?", Critical Inquiry 3 (Autumn, 1976): 3.

express the ideal of immanent interrelationships.

Thus, Levertov's poetics of organic form, although highly derivative, is valuable in that it is grounded in an awareness of the psychology of human creativity that has been passed on through a literary tradition that is at least as old as English Romanticism, if not older than the Bible. And it is significant in its expression of a basic human longing after a religious experience or perception of the organic whole. Further, it is important because it is a transitional work, as Levertov, herself, is a transitional figure in contemporary American literature, whose poets are described by Josephine Miles as ones whose:

terms of abstraction have decreased; their terms of natural symbol have decreased; they have sustained and even added to their sense of man's action in the world, his moving, calling, touching, or making. And their newly added terms of agreement are of a new sort: the terms of human construction in a humanly constructed scene.⁴

Not only does Levertov's poetics of organic form provide her with a methodology for continuing the eighteenth and nineteenth century's worship of nature, it contains certain "terms of abstraction" that would also be characteristic of Romantic and Victorian literature such as Hopkins' "inscape" and "instress", Wordsworth's notion that words are "the incarnation of the thought" (PIW, 16), and such expressions as "revelation", "waking vision", or "splendour of the authentic" (PIW, 13). And yet, in her striving for determinateness and organic economy, she is much more specific than were the Romantics in recording man's "actions in

⁴Ibid., p. 7.

the world", as was shown in the comparison of "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" and "To the Snake" that appeared in Chapter II. In the former, Wordsworth's perceptions are primarily visual; he meditatively gazes at the daffodils from a distance. In the latter poem, all of Levertov's senses are activated and, unlike the more passive Wordsworth, she acts to hang the snake around her shoulders and stroke it. Nor does she wander alone as did Wordsworth, but speaks to her "companions" in a transitional world of nature and men.

Thus, in her desire for organic determinism and economy, Levertov is a contemporary poet. The metaphors used by her to describe the work of art as possessing such determinism and economy evidence, however, that she is still a poet in transition who employs both natural symbols such as a plant or bird as well as man-made objects such as a crafted bench or table to describe the work of art as an organic whole. This transition in metaphors shows that Levertov is more and more involved with "the terms of human construction in a humanly constructed scene". But even these terms often reexpress the Romantic notion of the work of art as a mysteriously complex and integrated whole, as does Levertov in this scene of "human construction" where she likens a poem to the mysterious "silence when the tailor/ would pause with his needle in the air". For, one must admit that it is very difficult to fully and precisely define the nature of poetry. And, that is why the organic theory, although it may find new symbols for its expression, is likely to continue to be used in future poetics, as it has in the poetics of Denise Levertov, because it allows for the fact that what is essential to poetry is that a poem, like an

organism, is that which forms an inseparable and rationally
incomprehensible whole.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. Biographia Literaria. Edited by J. Shawcross.
London: Oxford University Press, 1965.

_____. The Complete Poetical Work. Edited by
Ernest Hartley Coleridge. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912.

_____. On Shakespeare. Edited by Terrence Hawkes
with an Introduction by Alfred Harbage. Harmondsworth, Middlesex:
Penguin Books, 1969.

_____. The Selected Poetry and Prose. Edited with
an Introduction by Donald Stauffer. New York: Random House, Inc.,
The Modern Library, 1951.

Duncan, Robert. The Opening of the Field. New York: New Directions
Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1973.

_____. Roots and Branches. New York: New Directions Publishing
Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1969.

_____. "Towards an Open Universe". In Poets on Poetry. Edited
by Howard Nemerov. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1966.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. The Complete Works. Edited with a Biographical
Introduction and Notes by Edward Waldo Emerson. 12 vols.
Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin & Co., The Riverside
Press, 1904; reprint ed. New York: AMS Press, 1968.

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. The Letters to Robert Bridges. Edited with
Notes and Introduction by Claude Collier Abbott. London: Oxford
University Press, 1955.

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. The Notebooks and Papers. Edited with Notes and Preface by Humphry House and completed by Graham Story. London: Oxford University Press, 1959.

_____. Poems and Prose. Edited with an Introduction by W.H. Gardner. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1953.

Keats, John. Selected Poetry and Letters. Edited with an Introduction by Richard Harter Fogle. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1969.

Kohler, Wolfgang. The Place of Value in a World of Facts. New York: Liveright Publishing Corp., 1938.

Levertov, Denise. "Craft Interview". In The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from the New York Quarterly, pp. 79-100. Edited by William Packard. New York: Doubleday & Co. for The New York Quarterly Poetry Review Foundation, Inc., 1974.

_____. The Double Image. London: The Cresset Press, 1946.

_____. Footprints. New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1972.

_____. The Freeing of the Dust. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1975.

_____. Here and Now. The Pocket Poets Series, no. 6. San Francisco: The City Lights Pocket Book Shop, 1956.

_____. "Interview". In The Sullen Art, pp. 73-76. Interviews by David Ossman. New York: Corinth Books, 1963.

- Levertov, Denise. The Jacob's Ladder. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1961.
- _____. Life in the Forest. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1978.
- _____. O Taste and See. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1964.
- _____. Overland to the Islands. North Carolina: Jargon Press, 1958.
- _____. The Poet in the World. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1973.
- _____. Relearning the Alphabet. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1970.
- _____. "Some Notes on Organic Form". In New Directions 20, pp. 123-128. Edited by J. Laughlin. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1968.
- _____. The Sorrow Dance. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1966.
- _____. "Statement on Poetics". In The New American Poetry 1945-1960. Edited by Donald M. Allen. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960.
- _____. To Stay Alive. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1971.
- _____. "Untitled statement as to Levertov's choice of her favorite poem, 'The Goddess'". In Poet's Choice, pp. 210-212. Edited by Paul Engle and Joseph Langland. New York: The Dial Press, 1962.

- Lavertov, Denise. With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads. New York:
New Directions Publishing, Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1959.
- Olson, Charles. Selected Writings. Edited with an Introduction by
Robert Creeley. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1966.
- Perls, Frederick, S.; Hefferline, Ralph F.; and Goodman, Paul.
Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality.
2 vols. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., A Delta Book, 1951.
- Pound, Ezra. Literary Essays. Edited with a Foreword by T.S. Eliot.
New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions
Paperbook, 1968.
- Stendhal. De l'amour. Translated by Gilbert and Suzanne Sale with an
Introduction by Jean Stewart and B.C.J.G. Knight. n.p.: The
Merlin Press, 1957; reprint ed. Harmondsworth, Middlesex:
Penguin Books Ltd., 1975.
- Sullivan, Louis H. The Autobiography of an Idea. Foreword by Claude
Braddon with an Introduction by Ralph Marlowe Line. New York:
Dover Publications, Inc., 1956.
- Thoreau, Henry David. Thoreau's Vision: The Major Essays. Edited with
an Introduction by Charles R. Anderson. Englewood Cliffs: New
Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., Spectrum Books, 1973.
- _____. A Writer's Journal. Edited by Laurence Stapleton.
New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1960.
- Williams, William Carlos. The Collected Earlier Poems. New York:
New Directions Publishing Corp., 1951.

Williams, William Carlos. The Collected Later Poems. Rev. ed. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1963.

Paterson. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1963.

The Reader. Edited with an Introduction by M.L. Rosenthal. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1966.

Selected Essays. New York: Random House, Inc., 1954; reprint ed., New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1969.

Wordsworth, William. Selected Poems and Prefaces. Edited by Jack Stillinger. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., Riverside Editions, 1965.

Translations

Dimock, Edward C., Jr. and Levertov, Denise, trans. In Praise of Krishna: Songs from the Bengali. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., Anchor Books, 1967.

Guillevic, Eugene. Selected Poems. Translated by Denise Levertov. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1969.

Supervielle, Jules. Selected Writings. Poems on pages 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 31, 87 and 93 translated by Denise Levertov. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., A New Directions Paperbook, 1967.

Secondary Sources

Abrams, M.H. The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1953.

_____. Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., The Norton Library, 1971.

Creeley, Robert. "Here and Now". New Mexico Quarterly 27 (Spring, 1957): 125-127.

Fogle, Richard Harter. The Idea of Coleridge's Criticism. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962.

Gelpi, Albert J. The Tenth Muse: The Psyche of the American Poet. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975.

Howard, Richard. Alone in America. New York: Atheneum, 1971.

Matthiessen, F.O. American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman. New York: Oxford University Press, 1941.

Miles, Josephine. "Artists on Art: Values in Language; or, Where Have Goodness, Truth, and Beauty Gone?" Critical Inquiry 3 (Autumn, 1976): 1-13.

Rexroth, Kenneth. American Poetry in the Twentieth Century. New York: The Seabury Press, A Continuum Book, 1973.

_____. "The Poetry of Denise Levertov". Poetry 91 (November, 1957): 120-123.

Rosenthal, M.L. The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction. New York: Oxford University Press, 1960.

Rosenthal, M.L. The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Stepan chev, Stephen. American Poetry Since 1945. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965.

Wagner, Linda W. Denise Levertov. United States Authors Series, no. 113. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967.