

BE(COM)ING A WOMAN: SUBJECTIVITY AND POETIC VISION IN DENISE LEVERTOV

Matilde Martín González
Universidad de La Laguna

ABSTRACT

This essay examines Denise Levertov's approach to the female subject in the way it is problematized both in her poems and essays. In so far as her commitment to a poetry deriving from experience characterizes her approximation to language and her relationship with the outside world, some of her poems clearly hint at a self-consciousness attained through her literary, political and personal vision. In the wake of the theoretical elaborations that feminist theory has engaged throughout the last two decades, this paper intends to show to what extent Levertov's poetry articulates textually the pivotal notions that feminists have addressed critically in connection with the self.

Since the publication of Denise Levertov's first American volume, *Here and Now*, in 1957, literary commentators have taken pains to squeeze her writing within conventional classifications. Thus, her friendship with Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan constituted a seemingly obvious argument to align her with the Black Mountain poets. Actually, she was never at Black Mountain herself. Additionally, the fact that Levertov embraced the main premises of Charles Olson's projective poetics led to an unfounded connection with the above mentioned group.¹ Similarly, linking her figure with the Beat poets (as some anthologies did throughout the '50s and '60s) testifies to the undeserved misunderstanding that Levertov's *oeuvre* has encountered. She has always disclaimed membership in any poetic school.² Her independence and dissociation from any recognizable group or faction constitutes a salient feature of both her personality and her poetic output.³ That Levertov's poetry doesn't reveal strictly feminine preoccupations is a notion which hardly needs further elaboration, for she

made in several occasions her position clear regarding this issue. As early as 1979 Levertov dilucidated her standpoint regarding the Women's Movement as an important socio-cultural advance but she overtly dismissed the woman-identified poetry produced in its wake on the grounds that it was "written by people who are feminist first, and possibly not poets even second" (Zwicky 125). Obviously enough, she is making reference to the mass of militant feminist poetry that was being published at the time as a direct consequence of the political and social pressures exerted by the women's liberation movement. Most of these authors she considered to be "feminists who decide(d) to write poetry because they [thought] of poetry as a vehicle for their feminism" (Zwicky 125). This merely instrumental utilization of poetry debases the poetic impulse, which for Levertov is sacred and must accordingly remain untouched by any egotistical or biased intention. In her essay "Genre and Gender vs. Serving an Art" she distinguished between *servicing* poetry and succumbing to a politically correct treatment of any social or personal injustice (no matter how legitimate the intention may be): "Without the sense of *servicing an art*, of *servicing* poetry and utilizing it as a vehicle, like a bus, all the authenticity of content and all the best social intentions in the world, whether conciliatory or militant, lofty or practical, will not help" (102). In the course of the last interview she conceded before her death in 1997 she touched once more upon this erroneous and irritating interference of the individual ego in the artistic process:

I'm certainly very tired of the me, me, me kind of poem, the Sharon Olds "Find the Dirt and Dig It Up" poem, which has influenced people to find gruesome episodes in their life, whether they actually happened or not. Back when Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton were the models of neophytes, you had to have spent some time in a mental hospital to qualify as a poet. Now you have to have been abused. I know perfectly well that lots of people really have been abused, but it's unfortunate to use the fact of abuse as the passport to being a poet (O'Connell).

First and foremost a poet, Denise Levertov always held the belief in the poem as an artifact which must "[retain] its numinous, mysterious energy and autonomy, its music, its magic" ("Genre" 103), notwithstanding how it could be affected by, or even derived from, external circumstances. The nature of poetic language in the fashion Levertov conceived it pertains to a realm of ineffable presences that cannot be automatically rendered in conventional language. She has defined poetry as "a way of constructing autonomous existences out of words and silences" (*Light* 60). Her unconditional commitment to poetry as a self-sufficient and sublime interplay of the intellect and the intuitive has shown her the path toward self-consciousness and also a means to comprehend, or, in her own words, to *apperceive*, the world. Throughout her career, she has been loyal to this principle and, yet, she has always found inspiration in her life as an ordinary woman, never losing the perspective of someone who has had to struggle in life, and in many occasions, to face the biological facts of being a woman. The influence of William Carlos Williams proved to be nothing short of decisive upon her arrival to the United States, as she frequently acknowledged. The concrete and immediate approach to poetry that Williams had aided her in the con-

struction of a personal language that was fit to express more precisely the facts of her daily life experiences. She has said that his influence “was very immediate and imitative when I was a greenhorn in America trying to come to grips with my new situation in life” (O’Connell). Her poetry inevitably takes root in all the events that shape her physical existence, but this has not hindered the articulation of a rigorous poetics predicated not so much on a self-expressive ground but on the notion that art is as an extremely demanding but rewarding work that ought to be carried out with utter dedication. Although some of her compositions clearly spring from her experience as a woman, it is the inner material of those poems, their textual quality, what is of supreme importance for the author.⁴ A materialist account of subjectivity would certainly challenge the value of “experience” in revealing or determining the *true identity* of individuals; experience is historicized as a variable and contingent factor that is constructed at the same time that language and self-consciousness are socially and politically grasped. According to Joan Scott, experience “is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation” (69), hence invalidating the centrality of experience in self-formation and its responsibility in shaping the true identity of subjects. Thus, a poetics based merely on “experience” does not guarantee the expression of authentic individuality and neither does it ensure the writing of remarkable poetry.

The above remarks notwithstanding, it is my contention that Denise Levertov’s poetry exhibited a profound concern respecting the notions of subjectivity, self-perception and identity-acquisition. But, more importantly, the texts which tackle these issues bear, if truly in a tentative mode, some resemblance to the epistemological polemics that feminist theory initiated in the ‘70s and that have been submitted to scrutiny ever after. Raising the questions what is a woman, who am I, and how can I get to know and define myself, has been a leit-motif of Levertov’s poetry, despite the fact that finding answers has not always been possible or even desirable. It is worth noting, in passing, that she was not fully conscious of how relevant problematizing those notions really was, for she has expressed her view of poetry as the interaction of reason and intuition, as the combination of intelligence and feeling, as a twofold phenomenon in which the conscious has no precedence over the unconscious and, consequently, reason doesn’t dictate neither the form nor the subject matter of the poem. Now I am aware of Levertov’s frequently stated objections against the intrusion of an extreme subjectivism in poetry; in fact, she has voiced her hope that the artist be “[safeguarded] from the superficialities resulting from overadaptation to the external, and from miasmatic subjectivities” (“Origins” 46). Furthermore, as suggested earlier, she disapproved of poetry as a means for facile and meaningless self-expression, as a mechanism to pour out one’s feelings and thoughts, as an outlet for one’s emotions. True poetry is, rather, a “construct of words that *remains* clear even after the writer has ceased to be aware of the associations that initially impelled it” (“Origins” 47), therefore achieving an independent existence separable from the person, or the self, that originated it. As Lyn Hejinian has argued, the concept of the “person” has gone hand in hand with that of “art” throughout history, and the former has enjoyed the status of an irreducible essence that lies somewhere inside of us. It has followed from this “a banal description of the work of art as an expression uttered in the artist’s ‘own voice’” (166) by which it is meant a uniform and homogeneous self

that grants coherence to the notion of identity.⁵ Denise Levertov would surely coincide with Hejinian's derogation of this historical conceptualization of art and the subject.⁶ She has often remarked that authentic poetry is not the result of someone's bright mind or craftsmanship, or of someone's opinions, but a process of discovery, an act of exploration and search, after which a revelation and an incarnation occurs, whereby the inner voice, the inherent music (of objects, of nature) is finally transmuted into language. Almost paradoxically, she has stated elsewhere that the poet "is constantly talking to himself, inside of himself, constantly approximating and evaluating and trying to grasp his experience in words" ("Line-breaks" 24), hence pointing to a close relationship between the self and language. What happens then, if you are a poet, is a sort of inner dialogue with yourself or with the different versions of what you think that constitutes your *self*, for they are likely to change in the same way that your body, your thinking, your life, do. This inexorable and constant transformation is most probably recorded in your poetry, without this signifying a loss of poetic distinctiveness or excellence. I want to take issue with William Aiken's global assessment of Levertov's poetry in terms of a decline of poetic inspiration in the volumes published after 1965. According to Aiken, Levertov's response to the political realities in America and the presentation of episodes of her own troubled life provoked a deterioration of the best qualities of her style, which are, namely, "containment, calm observation and imperturbability" (136).⁷ Being asked how she could reconcile poetry and political action, how she could evade the incoherence present in her condition as a poet and her participation in sit-ins, marching in the streets, helping to write leaflets, and all sorts of activism connected to leftists politics, Levertov replied that "precisely because I am a poet, I know, and those other poets who do likewise know, that we must fulfill the poet's total involvement in life in this aspect also" ("The Poet" 114). As a woman who understands poetry as the imbrication of experience and language, Levertov's writings attend to the outside world as much as to the inner self, for she believes that for the poet there exists a relation between "the inner and outer life which may not be denied without imperiling both" (*The Poet* ix). Moreover, she is convinced that "good poets write bad political poems only if they let themselves write deliberate, opinionated rhetoric, misusing their art as propaganda." ("The Poet" 115). Contrary to Aiken's belief that "as the content of her poems has become more personal the poetry itself has become less distinctive" (136) the thesis I want to substantiate is that first, Levertov's poetry has always been personal in a very particular way, never in terms of a complete self-disclosure, confessional-like style; and second, the increased treatment of personal subject matter has no bearing on a supposed decline in the quality of her poetic vision or the authenticity of her poems. By the same token, the primarily religious poetry that she has written since *Candles in Babylon* (1982) hasn't undermined the political and personal significance of her texts, and much less should this new direction in her poetry amount to a parallel turning down of her permanent concentration in the ways poems signify, in the structures which reveal the inner forms and the inner rhythms of poetry.

Without having to normalize Denise Levertov as a conventional feminist, my focus below is on those poems which address similar questions to the ones that feminist theory has been taking up in connection with the female subject and its expression. Albeit their recognized and recognizable diversity,⁸ feminist theoreticians ini-

tially converged in the attempt to delineate a coherent and consistent view of the feminine subject as a preliminary condition to establish woman's identity on a politically solid ground. This thesis was eventually contested by theories which disclaimed the relevance and political efficacy of accomplishing such a task. Hence, by the early eighties the debate over the feminine subject reached a status of polarized argumentation around two main positions that continue to be reposed and recast: that in favor of an essential feminine substance inhering in all women despite racial, social and cultural differences; and another one which not only has shown an explicit disdain for the notion of an intrinsic feminine identity but which has rejected altogether the existence of a "self" either for women or for men, thus dissenting from the humanist subject and its concurrent values of mastery, sovereignty and transcendence. From this poststructuralist perspective, the subject is constructed and neither masculinity nor femininity have an intrinsic existence, for human nature is bound up to a constant process of re-formation and re-constitution. Basically, the psychoanalytic and the materialist accounts of subjectivity have endorsed, respectively, the two positions summarized above.

The discussions about the status and constitution of the subject became the major theoretical debate among feminists in the '90s. But prior to this decade already an important degree of the energy and enthusiasm of feminist critics was employed in trying to dilucidate an adequate framework to analyse the subject issue. Significantly enough, Denise Levertov dealt with this topic in her poetry of the '60s and the '70s, suggesting some crucial points about self-definition and the concept of identity. Ultimately, her use of language and the ideas she wanted to render poetically provided her with a site for the critical introspection necessary to reconcile, occasionally, the internal uncertainties about herself with the need to enforce self-possession and autonomy. However, in an early poem she seems to be rather sure of what type of selfhood she desires, assuming the traditional notion of the subject as the ideal one -characterized by agency and action- and implicitly rejecting the allegedly feminine values of fragility and passivity:

*In childhood dream-play I was always
the knight or squire, not
the lady:
quester, petitioner, win or lose, not
she who was sought. (Poems 1968-1972 96)*

Achieving the status of rational beings had been a classic goal of feminist thinking since the XVIIIth century Feminist critics initially laid claim to the category of subject in the same terms men had been endowed with, that is to say, as a unified, transcendental, sovereign and rational individual. Women demanded that they were accorded the type of human nature that Lyn Hejinian has described as "an inner, fundamental, sincere, essential, irreducible, consistent self" (166) and which she overtly opposes. The *lady*, represented poetically as an inert and passive being, parallels the social notion of woman on a similar basis, deprived of agency and thus of a proper subjectivity. However, the poet's longing to attain those values is clearly set in childhood days, hence implying that "adulthood" —or the real world— would not bring about the desired

outcome of becoming a “real” subject, one who seeks her own destiny, and not *she who is sought*. An initial response intended to counteract the exclusion of women from the domain of cartesian subjectivity consisted in the assumption and radical valorization of an intrinsic womanhood, different and extricable from manhood or masculinity. This cultural feminist perspective obviously run the risk of embracing an essentialist position, in so far as the traces of the external factors that participate in the constitution of individuals are erased entirely. In *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* Nancy Chodorow uses the psychoanalytic category of sexual difference to account for the ways in which feminine personality differs from men’s. She argues that since women don’t have to resist the identification with the mother, and neither the supposedly feminine attributes of love-capacity and maternal orientation, they develop a “relational” tendency which compels them to become constantly attentive to the needs of others, thus showing less distinct ego boundaries than men. This cultural feminist approach,⁹ which Linda Alcoff calls “a romanticized conception of the female” (335), is utterly indefensible but not completely irrelevant, for the idea of women’s natural tendency to nurture others and to promote love and peace has proved to be politically useful in ecological and pacifist movements. “Mad Song” arguably presents a feminine *persona* with the traits of femininity that cultural feminism has valorized, but Levertov stresses that this woman lived in the past and now this self has disappeared. The narrator feels that her newly-attained madness constitutes her present self, strong-willed and aggressive, albeit no longer feminine:

*My madness is dear to me.
I who was almost always the sanest among my friends,
one to whom others came for comfort,
now at my breasts (that look timid and ignorant,
that don't look as if milk had flowed from them,
years gone by,
cherish a viper. (Poems 1968-1972 47)*

It is made explicit that the old self, the sane and obedient one — nurturing, comforting, reassuring — has become monstrous and unbecoming. The new woman has disobeyed the basic rules of conventional femininity, threatening to overthrow the social order. Significantly, Levertov has chosen the image of the breasts, the most recognizable feature of biological feminine gender, to embody the radicalization of her behavior. Those breasts have lost the maternal traits that made them valuable in the past and now they hold only anguish and bitterness, rage and defiance. It is not certain whether she welcomes her new self or not, for she “has forgotten how to tell joy from bitterness,” and yet this new state of being is dear to her, it fulfills her need of growth and self-exploration.

A new line of enquiry within feminist theory considered that the most adequate strategy to give social and political visibility to women didn’t reside in converting them into rational and transcendental individuals, as men allegedly were; encapsulating women into that definition of subjecthood was deemed unnecessary and prone to failure. Instead, in the wake of poststructuralist thought, feminist critics problematized the modern conceptualization of the subject, dismissed it as utterly inapt, and began

accordingly to survey the constituted nature of individuals. Either discursively or linguistically, subjects came to be understood as constructed but never definitively formed. The conception of language plays a fundamental role within this new scheme, for the feminine task of expressing femaleness or femininity needs a language able to represent its overwhelming complexity. Feminist theory has taken up the poststructuralist conceptualization of language as a differential mode of achieving and conveying knowledge. In other words, language is conceptualized as a contextual phenomenon which elicits meanings out of the relationships between surrounding elements. By the same token, this view of language, always tentative and in a state of continuous deferral, precludes any articulation of subjectivity in abiding terms in so far as our inner selves are bound to transformation and reconstruction. In the same way that language cannot be fixed, subjectivity is never fixed either. What we may be sure of is that we recognize ourselves from a given position and this presupposes the notion of subjectivity as a process and not as a finished product that remains inalterable. As Lyn Hejinian holds, “subjectivity is not an entity but a dynamic” (167). This subject-in-process, contextual and mediated (that for Julia Kristeva means the occasional retrieval by the individual of the semiotic reminiscences) is of necessity discontinuous and multiform. The different positions adopted by it point to its ever more uncertain status and, ultimately, to the impossibility of circumscribing it within strict boundaries. In “Stepping Westward” Levertov presents herself in a state of contingency, subjected to a condition of never ending provisionality and, more importantly, to an indefiniteness that precludes any straightforwardly innate account of herself:

*If woman is inconstant,
good, I am faithful to*

*ebb and flow, I fall
in season and now*

*is a time of ripening.
If her part*

*is to be true,
a north star,*

*good, I hold steady
in the black sky*

*and vanish by day,
yet burn there*

*in blue or above
quilts of cloud. (Poems 1960-1967 165)*

Seemingly contradictory, she is re-presenting her identity within an exploratory framework and as such, indefinite and hesitant, embracing contraries in order to,

paradoxically, identify features to define herself. She sets aside globalizing and essentialist notions of womanhood and advocates the right to describe herself in non-specific and imprecise terms that nonetheless convey, in a certain sense, the uniqueness of her person:

*There is no savor
more sweet, more salt*

*than to be glad to be
what, woman,*

*and who, myself,
I am, a shadow*

*that grows longer as the sun
moves, drawn out*

On a thread of wonder.

The culturally weighted image of the shadow is transformed into a valuable symbol that subverts the negative connotations traditionally ascribed to the shadow as a metaphor that stands for women in opposition to men. The last lines of the poem evoke, borrowing Rachel B. DuPlessis's phrase, "an epiphany of self-discovery" (200), and, above all, the validation of women's female condition as magical and life-giving, as the ultimately inspiring circumstance of her life:

If I bear burdens

*they begin to be remembered
as gifts, goods, a basket*

*of bread that hurts
my shoulders but closes me*

*in fragrance. I can
eat as I go.*

Somewhat related to the postmodern notion of the self as fragmented and decentralized, "Wind Song" begins by asking herself insistently: "Who am I? Who am I?," to which Levertov replies underscoring the dislocated nature of her subjectivity: "I am fiery ember, dispersed/ in innumerable fragments." And she proceeds to describe herself on the grounds of a variable, unsteady self-perception: "my soul is scattered / across the continents /in the named places and the named and unnamed / shadowy faces." (*Poems 1968-1972* 60). Basically unknown and unknowable, enigmatic, inconsistent, unaccountable, is the view of the poet's self, thus hinting at the impossibility of knowing one's self entirely, and, hence, of offering a complete definition. As

Chris Weedon observes: “It is important to see subjectivity as always historically produced in specific discourses and never as one single fixed structure” (90). While we cannot affirm whether Levertov was or was not aware of the theoretical discussions entertained by feminist critics, her texts do nevertheless exhibit her concern for issues that feminist criticism was likewise discussing on a theoretical basis. More specifically, what Linda Alcoff has termed the “identity crisis in feminist theory” (330), i.e., the inherently inconclusive nature of all attempts to establish definitively what a woman is, had been broached by Levertov even before this problem was deemed fundamental by feminists. As a part of the never ceasing process of constructing subjectivity, the notion of self-consciousness was believed to contain a similar relevance for women. Teresa de Lauretis has aptly defined it as “a particular configuration of subjectivity, or subjective limits, produced at the intersection of meaning and experience” (*Feminist Studies* 8). In other words, social meaning and personal experience converge in the generation of a particular consciousness that the individual is allowed to effect despite the constraints placed by political institutions and social norms. Adopting the foucaultian notion of subjectivity as discursively produced, de Lauretis contends that identity is never final either in our perception or our rendition of it. She has refined the concept of identity in terms which help us clarify the basic intricacy found when one attempts to build an adequate scheme to explore it and her analysis provides insight into the ways in which we understand identity as multifarious and conflicting. She has put forward “the concept of a multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds with language; an identity made of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class [...]” (*Feminist* 9). De Lauretis’ configuration applies remarkably well to some of Levertov’s texts, for her sustained commitment to a poetry derived from experience explains to some extent why the female subject figuring in her poems cannot be reduced to a unified entity. Specifically, this variable, inconsistent and discontinuous subject is dramatized by Levertov in “Hypocrite Women.” Arguably an attack against women’s cowardice and hypocrisy I see it rather as an exposition of the self-contradictory subjectivity that Lauretis posited in the above remark:

*Hypocrite women, how seldom we speak
Of our own doubts, while dubiously
We mother man in his doubt!*

*And if at Mill Valley perched in the trees
The sweet rain drifting through western air
A white sweating bull of a poet told us*

*Our cunts are ugly – why didn’t we
Admit we have thought so too? (And
What shame? They are not for the eye!) (Poems 1960-1967 142)*

Conflicting perceptions of identity coexist in these women, who disown their natures and don’t admit to having succumbed to the others’ views on themselves. They renounce their dreams in order to meet the requirements of socialized femininity:

... *And when a
dark humming fills us, a*

*coldness towards life,
we are too much women to
own to such unwomanliness.*

*Whorishly with the psychopomp
We play and plead —and say
Nothing of this later. And our dreams,*

*With what frivolity we have pared them
Like toenails, clipped them like ends of
Split hair.*

The final image of the “split hair,” likely to stand for woman’s split-self in this context, evinces the inner antagonism occurring within women. Uttered from a plural first person, the text highlights that the author herself is included in the narrative. What is a woman? And what means to be unwomanly? At this point, it is worth recalling that the notion of subjectivity we are using cannot dispense with the import of our necessary participation in social processes and practices. Being women, those social phenomena are almost synonymous with the gendered construction of femininity.¹⁰ The female hypocrisy that Levertov puts forward is directed against women themselves; they yield to masculine expectations of female conduct, they forget their own plans and projects and give up their selves, in order to remain in a state of voluntary submission and obedience. The conflict between subjective individuality and the observance of discursive norms figures in this composition as an echo of the shifting, unstable self that Lauretis proposed. Women’s self-perception is bound up with their experiences that, according to de Lauretis, play a fundamental role in subjectivity-formation and which she defined as the “continuous engagement of a self or subject in social reality” (*Alice Doesn’t* 182). Thus, subjectivity is not a priory entity that awaits recognition and expression but rather a network of relationships between the self and the outside world. The social reality which surrounds these women is forceful enough so as to make them ashamed of their own bodies, and the inclusion of the term “cunt” has celebratory connotations which, apart from praising female sexuality, does also signify an overt critique of the misogynist assessment of the female body that has persisted in modern culture. This critique achieves a political significance because it has a bearing on women’s perception of themselves, hence manifesting the clear link between the political and personal areas in which subjectivity and, mainly, self-consciousness is acted out. And when Levertov asserts that women themselves have thought that cunts are ugly she is intimating one of the multiple fashions in which the feminine subject has been historically and discursively produced, as Weedon’s above remark suggested.

The contingent condition of the subject is a common ground that all poststructuralist thinkers share on the matter, if certainly in various modes. Thus, Linda Alcoff, as Weedon, conceives the subject as resulting from historical experience. Doubtlessly enough, in women’s past and present condition the implications of the gender system

have determined self-consciousness to a great extent. Resembling somewhat de Lauretis' perspective, Alcoff argues for the examination of the feminine subject in reference to a particular position, by virtue of which we can ascertain "the external context within which that person is situated" (349) rather than the supposedly essential substance that impregnates the whole of women's beings. This "positional" approach takes into consideration all the other elements at stake when women's identity is dealt with, namely, discursive structures, ideological constructions, political institutions and so forth. Perhaps this positional account of the female subject can well apply to a poem so seemingly reactionary as "The Wife" (*Collected Earlier Poems* 114):

*A frog under you,
knees drawn up
ready to leap out of time,*

*a dog beside you,
snuffing at you, seeking
scent of you, an idea unformulated,*

*I give up on
trying to answer my question,
Do I love you enough?*

*It's enough to be
so much here. And
ertainly when I catch*

*your mind in the
act of plucking
truth from the dark surrounding nowhere*

*as a swallow skims a
gnat from the
deep sky,*

*I don't stop to ask myself
Do I love him? But
laugh for joy.*

The poetic *persona* in this text speaks from the position of the loving wife. But, was she conscious of the gendered connotations that such an act entails? Did she regard the psychic cost that it implies for her, if it did? Did this position utterly exclude other potential perceptions of her individuality once and for all? And, finally, does the position of wifehood that Denise Levertov is endorsing override the relevance of other aspects of her identity? I don't think so. Since the perceiving subject cannot be assumed to be a coherent or a meaning-generating individual any longer, she is showing us only one of the manifold positions that she is likely to adopt through-

out life. This one, justified by love and the happiness that it brings, constitutes one among numerous others that she will eventually embrace. No state of being or version of self-consciousness is definitively established. In a later poem, entitled “Of Being” she seems to be aware of the ephemeral nature of human feelings and realities when she writes “I know this happiness / is provisional” (*Oblique* 79) in reference to a moment of religious bliss. Similarly, a poem with Yeatsian overtones like “A Cloak” records the poet’s transition from an early, pure and innocent search for words, groping after poetic inspiration, to a harder, tougher view of herself as someone whom experience has taught to be vigilant, wearing a mask that “she had not meant to wear, as if of frost / [covering] her face” (*Poems 1968-1972* 42). As part of the ongoing dynamics of constructing and reconstructing the self, of translating the alterations produced in your inner self into poetic language (and never reaching a final point of dialectical resolution) Levertov’s poetry exhibits the transitoriness of life itself, the contingency of human nature, subjected to the changes that external reality certainly enforces. By the same token, life is an endless discovery and so is poetry for her: a constant effort to find the inherent qualities of language, “being attentive to the form that emerges” (O’Connell). From this perspective, life, work and subjecthood yield multiple and different accounts of the same physical person, which doesn’t mean that the subject is necessarily absurd or unreliable, but rather the contrary. Precisely because human nature partakes of an unsettled and shifting condition we cannot attain a unified self-consciousness but only a provisional sense of one’s identity. In the light of this rationale, then, I cannot subscribe to Deborah Pope’s elaborations on Levertov’s split-self poems, compelling as her analysis is in many respects. She assumes rather unproblematically that Levertov’s poetry demonstrates a specific treatment of the split-self theme concurrent with her awareness of a split identity. This split-self was polarized around two extreme roles, namely, that of the conventionally acceptable woman (wife and mother) and that of the poet, socially menacing and perceived as potentially disruptive. She further contends that this inner struggle ultimately reached a state of consensus brought about by Levertov’s final choice of the artist self and concomitant rejection of the private one, which she describes as “the less authentic self” (77). Obviously enough, arriving to such a conclusion implies working with an essentialist model that discriminates between the true, genuine self and the false and dispensable one. According to Pope, Levertov gave expression to this intrinsic dichotomy through an irreconcilable friction between the writer and the housewife roles. As she puts it: “Levertov consistently locates poetry in realms that seem unavailable to her as a woman, realms she can only enter in disguise or by risking her status as a good, acceptable woman” (83). Pope’s view has been implicitly refuted by Levertov herself when in “An Autobiographical Sketch” she affirmed that since her childhood her gender wasn’t conceived or perceived as if an “obstacle to anything I really wanted to do” (262). Apart from this biographical statement, it does seem to me that Levertov’s poetry itself evidences that such an antagonism between two selves as Pope suggests was not manifest at all or, at least, not in the radicalized mode that she has observed. Moreover, dispersed among her many interviews and biographical essays, one comes across telling clues that make up the image of Levertov as a person with a firmly held conviction of her poetic vocation since very early in life, hence invalidating Pope’s thesis almost entirely. Actually, if there is something which has granted coherence, at

least momentarily, to Levertov's personal identity is precisely her condition of poet. "Canción," an early composition, testifies to the perception of her womanhood and her feminine circumstance as inextricably linked to her poetic self:

*When I am the sky
a glittering bird
slashes at me with the knives of song.*

*When I am the sea
fiery clouds plunge into my mirrors,
fracture my smooth breath with crimson sobbing.*

*When I am the earth
I feel my flesh of rock wearing down:
pebbles, grit, finest dust, nothing.*

*When I am a woman —O, when I am
a woman,
my wells of salt brim and brim,
poems force the lock of my throat. (The Freeing 49)*

Fundamentally destructive, the elements of nature she associates with bring nothing but uneasiness and anxiety. And yet, she does not reject their influence altogether but acknowledges their presence in her self. When she gets embodied in the sky, the sea and the earth, the possibilities of poetic and personal growth are to some extent curtailed. On the contrary, self-identification, however redundant and undefined alike, for she doesn't make explicit what is it that she is when *she is a woman*, works the miracle of poetic creation, setting her free in order to let out poems as if effortlessly. The poetic self and the private self in conjunction with each other constitute the poet's identity in an indissoluble bond. In the fashion of Lacan's configuration of the subject, the last lines of the poem place the emphasis on the linguistic determination of her subjectivity, for her poetry and her femininity become undistinguished. The poems which struggle to get out of her throat represent the achievement of a full subjectivity, poetic but also personal, for if individuals finally achieve subjecthood through the acquisition of language, then Levertov's self resides ultimately in the articulation of her (poetic) language. The notion of the subject as a product of discourse finds an echo in this poem and Julia Kristeva's claim that we are "subjects of a language that hold us in its power" (9) seems to apply particularly to this text. But Kristeva also argued that we are "subjects in process, ceaselessly losing our identity" (9) and constantly working out a reconstruction of our selves that serves us at a given time and place, but not for ever after. In her view, the process-like nature of subjectivity reveals itself most evidently when writing poetry or during other moments of *incandescence*, that is to say, when the semiotic reminiscences make their appearance and compel us to disrupt the ordered and orthodox symbolic language, which we have learned to internalize so as to achieve ordinary communication and which suppresses the semiotic, i.e., the creative, chaotic language that reminds us of our pre-symbolic stage. Under no circumstances is iden-

tity fixed then. Refining somewhat Kristeva's thought, Judith Butler has argued that the very notion of an identity will eventually turn out to be inadequate and essentially irrelevant, for "identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary" ("Contingent" 15). However, she also makes clear that to problematize the subject doesn't entail to do away with it, but only to "[interrogate] its construction as a pre-given or foundationalist premise" ("Contingent" 9). In a similar line of thinking have most feminist thinkers recently theorized the subject. Bearing in mind the contested nature of this concept, they have nonetheless coincided in repudiating the utterly displaced postmodern subject, for this model fails to consider the idea of feminine agency. Most efforts have been directed towards negotiating a sort of middle ground where women could have access to regions of self-significability without the risks of totalization or of foreclosing the possibility of subjecthood. But, above all, they have agreed on the conflictive nature of the term "woman," which has become ever more debatable and subjected to continuous contest. As Judith Butler indicates, "woman is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end" (*Gender Trouble* 33). Immersed in this undecidability, a woman like Denise Levertov searched in God and in nature for the only presences through which to capture a sense of immanence and cogency, of consistent revelations. Ostensibly endorsing a transcendentalist stance, Levertov's last volumes offer her insistent pursuit of a reliable faith, of a solid divine existence to which she could hold onto. But it is important to note that her alleged shift from an agnostic standpoint to a Christian orthodox position did occur gradually, alongside the experiences of the later part of her life. In other words, this transition mirrors the process-like course that subjectivity undergoes, the ever present action of becoming a subject.¹¹ "Flickering Mind," from the 1993 volume *A Door in the Hive*, records the poet's crisis of faith, her incapacity to find the presence of God no matter how strong her desire to do it: "Lord, not you / it is I who am absent" (68). Her convictions have faltered and she is eager to get over this moment of religious uncertainty, which for her means an existential distress as well: "I stop / to think about you, and my mind / at once / like a minnow darts away, darts / into the shadows, into gleams that fret / unceasing over / the river's purling and passing." She needs desperately a center, a powerful figure to rely on, for her wandering self is lost and despite knowing that God is the source of all relief and joy, she cannot focus her *flickering*, she is unable to make herself steady again:

*Not for one second
will my self hold still, but wanders
anywhere,
everywhere it can turn. Not you,
it is I am absent.
You are the stream, the fish, the light,
the pulsing shadow,
you the unchanging presence, in whom all
moves and changes.
How can I focus my flickering, perceive
at the fountain's heart
the sapphire I know is there?*

The explicitly Christian poetry of Levertov's last books does not necessarily entail a complete reformulation of her poetic self, or neglect of her former interests. It rather betrays to what extent her poetic identity and individual subjectivity were closely linked. In addition, for Levertov it was of the utmost consequence to make her life cohere as she perceived it within "the insane, rationalist optimism that surrounds the development and dependence on technology today" (O'Connell). She was of late convinced that "our ethical development does not match our technological development" (Ibid.) and her "sense of spiritual hunger" was an effort to counteract the strength of what she called the present "technological euphoria" (Ibid.). Definite elements contributed to produce a religious response to the ills of the surrounding world and poetry was the site where Levertov's inner contradictions were located. Not only her mind, but her selfhood has been constantly *flickering*, groping after expression and closure, always hesitant and elusive, but trying to work out an individual domain of self-possession and to establish, in some way, a realm of self-articulation. Accordingly, Denise Levertov's poetry evinces both her pursuits and her achievements, her doubts and her beliefs, her spiritual self-exploration and her physical un/certainties. Whether seeking for truth or for beauty, writing poetry has been the vehicle, not the instrument, through which her self—and her life—is shown to the readers. And in this life, pleasure lies within the process of living itself, in the discovery of forms and rhythms in nature and in language. She defined the pleasures incarnated in poetry and in life as finding "what's not found/ at once, but lies/ Within something of another nature,/ in repose, distinct" (*Collected Earlier* 90). That finding implied finding herself also, but losing it eventually and having to look for it again, in a continued and endless self-exploration. In another poem Levertov writes "Greyhaired, I have not grown wiser,/ unless to perceive absurdity/ is wisdom" (*A Door* 134); this last paradoxical statement locates the subject beyond uniformity and intelligibility at the same time that, if anything, the ever problematic constitution of the self is, again paradoxically, the only certainty to be assumed when considering selfhood. Her self and her life were perceived by Levertov as a "time for rivets" (*A Door* 135), no matter how reinforced she thought they were, how settled she found herself in her last years, when no alteration was supposed to affect her life anymore. Unsure of what being a woman means, Levertov found relative strength at least in her poetry; and her most recent production revealed the poet living with "a door open to the transcendental, the numinous" (*New & Selected* 241), in a final effort to fully articulate a sense of herself. In her last book of poems, published posthumously in 1999, one finds a poet determined to grasp the self totally but equally convinced of the fundamental impossibility to attain this goal:

*If humans could be
that intensely whole, undistracted, unhurried,
swift from sheer
unswerving impetus! If we could blossom
out of ourselves, giving
nothing imperfect, withholding nothing! (This Great 12)*

Inside the *great unknowing* of life the self remains forever elusive.

Notes

- ¹ A close analysis of her prose writings of the early '60s clearly shows Levertov's personal approach to technical issues which derived from but did not adhere completely to Olson's poetics. For instance, she rather followed William Carlos Williams's notion of the "variable foot" than Olson's focusing on the breath because "it doesn't work out in practice" ("Line-Breaks" 23). Moreover, her well-known reformulation of the Olsonian phrase "Form is never more than an extension of content" into "Form is never more than a *revelation* of content" testifies as well to her own thinking about open or exploratory forms. Her particular perspective on this issue parallels the overall conception of poetry that Denise Levertov has always held as a means of revealing the inner voice, the inner music in things and nature. And finally, instead of following strictly Olson's principle that in organic poetry "one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception" (as quoted by Olson himself from Edward Dahlberg) she has confessed to having learnt from Robert Duncan the value of silence in poetry, the positive effects of the "great gaps between perception and perception which must be leapt across if they are to be crossed at all" ("Some Notes" 73).
- ² In this respect, Levertov has made reference to her being unjustly associated with male poets of Black Mountain, and other groups, during her beginnings as a poet. Making a critique of the ways in which she was "chosen, tacitly, by some group of male poets, or by individuals, as the exception that proved the rule —the rule that poetry was a masculine prerogative and that women were, by and large, either Muses or servants" (*In Her Own* 98) helped her to realize her unwanted position as "token woman poet" inside an all-male community of writers. As recent studies have shown, during Olson's rectorship of Black Mountain College (1951-56), he instigated a rather masculinist atmosphere which ignored women writers as deficient or utterly unable. Francine du Plessix Gray, for instance, has commented on the almost tyrannical role played by Olson in his seminars, which he stressed in the case of prospective women writers, and that she later came to understand as part of the "bittersweet paradox of being a woman writer under Olson's influence" (Conniff 125).
- ³ The stature of Denise Levertov as a poet runs parallel to her prominence as a literary essayist, if certainly this dimension of her career is rarely taken into account, maybe because she never meant to become a serious critic. As a matter of fact, she has acknowledged the didactic motivation that prompted her decision to first collect her prose writings in *The Poet in the World* (1973), for she was being asked too often by students and interviewers about issues that had to do with her own poetry and with poetry in general.
- ⁴ As she expressed it in 1983: "If a woman poet writes poems on what her female body feels like to her, what it's like to menstruate, to be sexually entered by a man, to carry and bear a child and breast-feed it, her *subject* matter derives directly from her gender; but it will be the *structure* of the poem, its quality of images and diction, its details and its totality of sounds and rhythms, that determines whether or not it *is* a poem —a work of art" ("Sexual Poetics" 75).
- ⁵ Judith Butler too has spelled out to what extent the values of "coherence" and "continuity," used by modern thinking as defining traits of the person, are actually just "socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility" (*Gender Trouble* 17), in other words, epistemic structures which are used in order to monitor and organize individual behavior.
- ⁶ The affinities between a poet like Lyn Hejinian and Denise Levertov start and end here, for current experimentalist poets question the notion of the "I" in a fashion that Levertov never contemplated.

⁷ Other critics have also disparaged Levertov's poetry for its embeddedness in the political and social context. Moreover, she has received similar criticisms from fellow-poets, being the controversy with Robert Duncan perhaps the most hurting in personal terms. In a recent essay Marjorie Perloff reviews the reasons for that controversy which can be summarized as their different views about the relationship of poetry to politics. According to Perloff, Duncan disapproved of Levertov's turning into a mouthpiece and her progressive abandonment of a poetics of imagination in favor of a poetics of political commitment, what rendered her war poems preachy and facile. Perloff asserts that Duncan's criticisms were "never directed against Denise herself" (219) but the rift between both certainly caused a personal estrangement that lasted until Duncan's death in 1988. While Perloff tries to maintain a detached tone in this debate, one can actually read between the lines her approval of Duncan's position and her condemnation of Levertov, who "was not the forgiving type" (220) even though Duncan apologized by explaining that his contentions with her amounted to his fears of "some womanish possibility in myself" (220). Levertov's nonchalance, so Perloff suggests, remained unaltered even though Duncan made his best to win Levertov's friendship again talking in subsequent letters about such *feminine* issues as "his partner Jess, his garden, his own weaknesses" (220) that he thought would appeal to Levertov. I do coincide, nevertheless, with Perloff's final argumentation that the "interest the correspondence (between Duncan & Levertov) raises is in the larger issue of the poetry/politics debate —a debate very much with us today in the guise of the so-called Culture Wars" (220).

⁸ The concept of "feminist theory" is far from achieving a consensual status, for there are different theoretical models and lines of examination. Besides, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson emphasize, "feminist critics do not slavishly adhere to a particular theoretical line. They actively engage, critique, and modify theoretical models even as they import certain ideas and vocabularies into their reading practices" (16), hence stressing the eclectic nature of feminist thinking and its open epistemological condition.

⁹ Apart from Nancy Chodorow, this model has been developed by Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly.

¹⁰ In this respect, Judith Butler has indicated that women cannot adopt a position outside "the contemporary field of power" (*Gender Trouble* 5), in other words, women cannot escape the inscription of their identity, or the lack of an identity for that matter, within a patriarchal grid of power relations. The hypocrisy that Levertov is denouncing in her poem has to do with women permitting this predicament to continue with their acquiescence.

¹¹ Levertov herself has explained the progressive nature of this personal conversion in "A Poet's View" (*New & Selected* 341-2).

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