

**MYSTERIES AND NATURE:
LEVERTOV'S *SANDS OF THE WELL****

“What harbinger?,” the poem that opens up *Sands of the Well*, looks, with hindsight, bewilderingly ominous.

Glitter of grey
oarstrokes over
the waveless, dark,
secretive water.
A boat is moving
toward me
slowly, but
who is rowing
and what
it brings I can't
yet see. (3)

It was only this last Christmas that Levertov “passed like Alice into the blind mirror” (8). Indeed, her last book of poems is an open secret, a language forest of harbingers, omens, symbols, and hieroglyphs of Nature. In “Creature to Creature,” for instance, the poet tells how, in the deep dark of the woods, an owl gave her a long regard, “steady, acknowledging, unbiased,” (44), to be thought of perhaps as a wise, complicitous acknowledgement to a whole life devoted to the task of writing poems. But far from falling into an all too temptingly idealized vision of Nature, Levertov gives a counterpoint to the former with “Warning,” a poem where a menacing wave rises like a bulwark, this time however to be interpreted not in a friendly manner but as a “warning not meant kindly” (42). Nonetheless, all throughout the book, the poet is driven to ecstatic moments of wonder in the contemplation of the landscape of the Pacific Northwest, with ever-recurring oneness in everything she sees there. Thus, in “Bearing the Light,” Levertov exults when she sees raindrops, each separate, hanging from peartree twigs, bearing the whole of the light beneath the clouds, “the indivisible shared out in endless abundance,” (37); or when she describes a “fish in the sky of water” whisking and wheeling in the water but always “at one/with the aqueous everything it shines in” (40).

In *Sands of the Well*, Levertov reaches the nadir of *einsehen*, “inseeing,” interiorizing it as “a way of being” whereby “one becomes/sometimes, a pair of eyes walking” (91); and language always “a way of breathing,/breathing to sustain/ looking (91). When, late in the book, she wonders whether she has outlived her vocation, her poems seeming to her to traverse the same road they did decades ago, she finds the answer in Cezanne’s crafty way of painting, “doggedly sur le motif;” ever wrestling with the same mountain, like Jacob with the Angel, to get it right; though it’s not only that, Levertov reflects, “it’s the way/radiant epiphanies recur, recur,/consuming, pristine, unrecognized-/until remembrance dismays you” (96). With her palette of language, Levertov also struggled to grasp the elusive mountain of the Pacific Northwest, Mount Rainier, which, though sometimes playing unobserved, still remains “a draft the artist may return to.”

The last poems of the book show a poet full of awe and gratitude for having been chosen for the task; these poems praise the Lord, as Supreme Creator of the beauty of Nature, sustaining the mystery of the Incarnation, life and Eternity; But she, like St. Thomas, must “feel the pulse in the wound” and “taste/bread at Emmaus” to believe the mystery. For the mystery and numen must come as a felt presence to her, whether it be embodied in silence (“L’Esprit souffle dans le silence, la où les mots n’ont plus de voix,” as she quotes in *Oblique Prayers*) or the deepening stillness and the transparency of Nature. The mystery of transparency appears in one poem to be substantiated in a wren that turns her into transparent air —“it can fly through me” (45); or, finally, in the poem that gives title to the book, the mysterious is reflected in the transparent stillness of the water in a well; having stirred with a wand of a willow the pool of the well, Levertov contemplates admiringly how the golden grains of sand descend slowly until “absolute transparency is complete” (124) But then she meditates on this

Transparency
seen for itself-
as if its quality
were not, after all,
to enable
perception *not* of itself?

Disbelieving her eyes, she performs the same operation with the willow wand,

And again
stillness ensues,
and the mystery
of that sheer
clarity, is it water indeed,
or air, or light? (125)

Sands of the Well shows that Levertov has excelled in apprehending with words the mysterious in Nature. That which “passeth all understanding,” she proves, can still happen among us, “here and now,” even if our attentions are elsewhere. For that,

and for many other things, her poetry has been and remains to be “Work that Enfaiths.”
The Mystery still goes on.

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* Levertov, Denise. *Sands of the Well*. New York: New Directions, 1996.

Works Cited

Levertov, Denise. *Oblique Prayers*. New York: New Directions, 1984.