



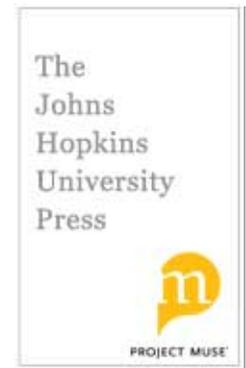
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Denise Levertov: A Poet's Life , by Dana Greene, and: *A Poet's Revolution: The Life of Denise Levertov* by Donna Krolik Hollenberg (review)

Jonathan Canary

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Denise Levertov: A Poet's Life. By Dana Greene. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-252-03710-8. Pp. xiv + 307. \$35.00.

A Poet's Revolution: The Life of Denise Levertov. By Donna Krolik Hollenberg. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-520-27246-0. Pp. xiv + 515. \$44.95.

"[A]ll that is most interesting about an artist's life must be in the work itself. There the autobiographical is often completely transformed, or, if undisguisedly recounted, is selected, and invested with a significance which transcends the ephemeral and narrowly personal." So wrote Denise Levertov in her essay "Biography and the Poet" (*New and Selected Essays*, 1992, 174). She was troubled by the exhibitionism and "narcissism" of much contemporary poetry, and believed that the best writing respected the author's own privacy. Although biography could be wonderfully illuminating, it should show the same respect. She added drily, "the lives of poets and other artists are not usually more interesting than anyone else's" (175).

Dana Greene quotes this essay—not without a sense of irony—in her recent biography of Levertov, the first to be published since the poet's death in 1997. However, Greene also points out that when Levertov penned these words, she was simultaneously negotiating the sale of her archives, including letters and journals, to Stanford University, where she lectured for a number of years. The woman who denounced those biographers who unnecessarily expose a poet's private life was at the same time enabling future scholars to explore her own innermost thoughts and emotions. And this apparent paradox has parallels in Levertov's poetic method: Greene writes, "Ambivalent about biography as an aide to understanding her poetry, Levertov nonetheless claimed repeatedly that her poems emerged from her life experience. While she rejected confessional or self-referential writing, her poems, 'testimonies of lived life,' reflect her dialogical engagement with the world around her." Greene recalls Eavan Boland's words: "I can think of few contemporary poets whose life and work were so connected" (231).

Greene attempts to sketch the major trajectories and patterns across Levertov's life. Much is made of young "Denny's" enduring sense of "destiny"—and the primacy of her poetic vocation. Another recurring theme is the struggle to make sense of seemingly incompatible opposites: wonder and danger, confidence and neediness, a life-experience patterned by paradox. For Greene, Levertov is "poet, prophet, and pilgrim" (2, 204). She never manages to be altogether at home in the world, and she presents a salutary challenge to those who are; and yet she loves the world, too.

Greene's biography focuses on the poet herself; but for me (perhaps unfairly) that focus is also the book's most serious flaw: I wanted much more of Levertov's splendid poetry. Donna Krolik Hollenberg's officially authorized volume, *A Poet's Revolution*, offers exactly that, along with a wealth of additional biographical material. Although she takes care not to assume a precise correspondence between poet and poetry, Hollenberg often turns to specific poems as a way of illuminating

Levertov's own story, and shows how personal developments may, in turn, shed light on the poems. Literary and biographical interpretation are blended here. The "revolution" of Hollenberg's title has a polyvalent meaning. It embraces major shifts and adjustments in the poet's personal life, her process of poetic development, and her serious sociopolitical concerns that could and sometimes did take a "revolutionary" form—but, above all, it signifies Levertov's habitual turning and returning toward what mattered most to her.

Denise Levertov's family of origin was characterized, if not by paradox or revolution, at least by surprising and striking contrasts. Her father was a scholarly Russian Jew who embraced Christianity, took the name Paul, and was eventually ordained in the Church of England—but who continued to claim the faith of his childhood: he translated the Anglican liturgy into Hebrew, and he always called himself a "*Jewish Christian*," as Levertov recalled in her semi-autobiographical collection of "Memories and Suppositions" (*Tesseræ*, 1995, 11). The poet's mother, Beatrice, was a Welsh teacher at a Scottish Mission school in Constantinople when she met her husband. These interwoven threads from the past became shaping influences. Important also was Denise's relationship with her brilliant older sister Olga—first one of intimacy and admiration, but later troubled and even dominated by Olga's increasingly erratic behavior. Hollenberg observes how Olga reappears poetically as a symbolic figure at various stages in Denise's career, and suggests ways that shifts in that portrayal, as well as in poems about her parents, mirror the poet's own emotional and psychological development.

Many of Levertov's adult relationships were difficult as well. Her marriage to Mitch Goodman brought her to the United States, the country where she spent most of her life and whose linguistic patterns she sought to inhabit in her poetry. Yet both partners dealt with periods of deep dissatisfaction and even depression, and the marriage eventually ended in divorce. Levertov's relationship to her son Nicolai was also perennially troubled. Some of her key friendships—perhaps most notably a profound bond with the poet Robert Duncan, first as a mentor and then increasingly a friend and equal—eventually foundered. At times her connection with others, including with younger students or colleagues, would begin to take a romantic or sexual turn; but many of these relationships ultimately brought pain and frustration, or failed to answer the deep sense of longing she felt. Greene's biography emphasizes the fascination and attraction that Levertov's vibrant personality could inspire, yet makes much of the poet's frequent struggle with the "wound" of rejection, and her ache for communion.

Denise Levertov shared with her husband Mitch a strong social and political concern. Both were involved with Vietnam protests, and Levertov's poetry includes gripping evocations of the human cost of such military operations, not only in Southeast Asia but in the Gulf War as well. She was teaching poetry classes at Berkeley in 1969 when a group of students and others began to transform a piece of undeveloped land into a "People's Park," a project which Levertov joined "with gusto"; when the university intervened and fights broke out between activists and police, she not only composed an open letter calling her colleagues to support the

movement, but also personally bailed out a student who had been arrested at a nonviolent protest (Hollenberg 252–53). As time passed, she became disenchanted with the way that violence could beget violence, even among those who sought justice, and she recommitted herself to practices of peace. But she continued to seek opportunities to demonstrate her social convictions—including joining peaceful protests at a nuclear power plant—and these themes remain an important strand in her poetry.

Involvement in these social movements brought Levertov into contact with religious activists of various stripes, including nuns and priests; and in later years, her own search increasingly included a religious aspect. Spiritual language and imagery had never been absent from her poems, but now she began more seriously to explore her own doubt and faith, and her relationship with God. Hollenberg describes the poem “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus” as a kind of inscribed conversion experience; Levertov “began what she thought of as ‘an agnostic Mass,’ using the word merely as a formal description,” but her biographer sees a shift in perspective in the final movement of the poem, toward acceptance and trust (321–22). During this period Levertov began attending services at various churches and speaking to spiritual advisors; but it was only late in her life that she chose to join the Roman Catholic Church, in part because of its liturgical and sacramental appeal but also due to a number of Catholics whose work for social reform inspired her. Her religious engagement remained complex and sometimes troubled, always a spirituality of journey rather than arrival. Still, many of her late poems wonderfully express this journey and its rhythms of struggle and trust. The year before she died, she described Fr. Jean Sullivan’s “active and passionate doubt” as being “a form of love” (quoted in Hollenberg 433); perhaps the same could be said of her own continued questioning. Among innumerable honors and other awards she received, the Conference on Christianity and Literature named her the recipient of its Lifetime Achievement Award in 1994.

As Dana Greene emphasizes, Levertov was a careful and dedicated craftswoman. The shape of each poem, even the choice of each word, was deliberate. Next to this lapidary precision, Greene’s own prose can seem diffuse and inexact. Early chapters include frequent summary and foreshadowing; at times, these feel awkward and distracting, or create unnecessary repetition. In the later chapters, however, with more of the poet’s life to work with, Greene is able to make connections and show patterns more naturally, and her portrayal of the shape of Levertov’s life starts to emerge.

Hollenberg, by contrast, tries to follow the development of Levertov’s own self-awareness, allowing the story to unfold as it will. This has advantages: her version feels less staccato, more thorough but simultaneously less repetitious. It is also, on the whole, better written. On occasion this “official” biography may dally overmuch with psychoanalytical speculations—although Hollenberg points out that Levertov herself had a long-standing fascination with Jungian typology, kept a journal of her dreams, and benefited from therapy. There are also one or two moments, such as the critical reading of “To Stay Alive,” when Hollenberg crosses

the line from biography to outright literary analysis (261–64). And she offers a less thorough exploration of the poet's relational struggles than Greene does. Overall, however, she weaves together a plenitude of information—much of it from Levertov's own poems, talks, journals, even unsent letters—in a way that sustains interest and reveals her subject.

Hollenberg's fuller biography should be the first choice for a general reader who wants to know Levertov better, as well as for scholars seeking biographical associations and interpretations of specific poems. Greene's may be useful for those who want more holistic interpretation of the poet's life, especially its relational and spiritual aspects; the summaries in Greene's chapter-opening paragraphs also make her volume accessible to students and others who just want to catch the highlights. But the two authors' approaches are sufficiently different that they often complement rather than compete with one another. As Greene writes, hers is an "experiment" rather than a final "definitive" account (234). Each book offers a specific angle on a complex and ultimately mysterious "inscape" (*ibid.*).

Levertov's poems often seem strikingly transparent to her own experience; yet they also leave much unsaid. And while she asserted the priority of poetry, her own story deserves to be told. Greene and Hollenberg together help illuminate Levertov's work for scholars, fellow-writers, and all those who have been moved, delighted, and instructed by her poems. Both deserve a share of the gratitude that Levertov herself sought to cultivate toward the goodness and wonder of the world.

Jonathan Canary

Baylor University

The Forsaken Son: Child Murder and Atonement in Modern American

Fiction. By Joshua Pederson. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016. ISBN 0810132273. Hardcover \$99.95. ISBN 0810132281. Paperback \$34.95. Pp. ix + 173.

Since the 1960s, a growing number of Christian theologians have developed a thoroughgoing reassessment of traditional theories of the atonement, arguing that our dominant modes of understanding the crucifixion have unwittingly legitimated violence and exploitation in both our interpersonal relations and our broader social norms. In his recent work, Joshua Pederson argues that the alarmingly frequent child murders that occur in postwar American fiction are expressions of their authors' skepticism about atonement theology and function as aesthetic extensions of a critical theological discourse that regards the death of Jesus as a filicide rather than a redemptive sacrifice. He contends that a number of leading contemporary American novelists create narratives of infanticide, where murdered children operate as Christ figures, in order to engage in "a deep and honest struggle with Christianity" (10). Like their theological counterparts, these authors—Flannery O'Connor, John Updike, Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates, and