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Poetry, Attentiveness and Prayer: One Poet's Lesson[1]

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Abstract

In *The Grain of Wheat*, Hans Urs von Balthasar quotes St. Basil on the intent contemplation of God's works. In *Letters to Malcolm*, C. S. Lewis speaks of making "every pleasure into a channel of adoration", by praising "these pure and spontaneous pleasures" as "'patches of Godlight' in the woods of our experience." According to Iris Murdoch, such attentiveness requires a degree of "selflessness" that resembles aesthetic contemplation and — it may be inferred — prayerful reflection. Using these passages and others by Kathleen Norris and Simone Weil, this essay offers related perspectives on the process and the effects of attentiveness, in poetry and prayer. Poets practise, and thereby teach an attentiveness that is analogous to that achieved in certain forms of prayer. Prayer, like poetry, gives thanks for the mysteries — even as it seeks to understand and respond to the injustices and sufferings — of life. Denise Levertov illustrates in her poetry an awareness of how such attentiveness can be productive, in her late religious poems especially.

Keywords

Poetry, Attentiveness, Prayer, Denise Levertov, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Iris Murdoch, C. S. Lewis, Simone Weil

> Listen carefully, and attend . . . with the ear of your heart.
>
> (St. Benedict)

Pay attention! We've all heard that injunction. It means re-directing, re-focusing our conscious awareness of something or some-one. "Attention" is a psychological but also a currently popular

[1] An earlier form of this essay was read at the Western Conference on Christianity and Literature, Point Loma University, San Diego, California, March 2004.

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philosophical concept.[2] It also has religious significance, with its roots stretching back several centuries. In the seventeenth, theologian and metaphysician Nicolas Malebranche called rigorous attention "the natural piety of the soul."[3] In the twentieth century, philosopher-novelist Iris Murdoch defends attentiveness as a way of deepening "experience to such a degree that a change of consciousness can be achieved."[4] In *The Sovereignty of Good* Murdoch includes a telling example:

> I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then, suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel.[5]

Numerous thinkers have acknowledged this experience. Something in the world around us attracts our "attention," and from being "self-centered,"[6] we become more or less totally "taken up" with what we are seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, or smelling.[7] "Attentiveness entails the transformation of everyday consciousness into an unpossessive almost *aesthetic* mode of contemplation in which we surrender ourselves to that which has won our attention and begin to free ourselves from the selfishness of everyday-consciousness."[8]

Such attentiveness is what a poet is about, and particularly a poet like Denise Levertov. Levertov, who was born in England but moved to the United States after World War II, died in 1997. An agnostic in

[2] Frank Kermode's *Forms of Attention* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985) uses the term to refer to how we value works of art or literature. The third essay is of tangential interest. We "pay attention" to things that are called to our attention. The person who calls our attention to things, by pointing them out, can be important. While my interest in "attentiveness" is rather different from Kermode's, the two forms of "attention" are related.

[3] Geoffrey Hartmann "Text and Spirit," *Western Humanities Review* LIII no. 4 (Winter 1999–2000), pp. 297–314 addresses some of the same issues that this essay does.

[4] Nicholas Davey, "On the Polity of Experience: Towards a Hermeneutics of Attentiveness," *Renascence* LVI no. 4, (Summer 2004), pp. 220.

[5] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London, Routledge, 1970), p. 84.

[6] Daniel Brudney, "Marlow's Morality," *Philosophy and Literature* (27 2003), pp. 318–340 refers to the "virtue" of "*attentiveness*" (318) and later cites Simone Weil as a source for "*attentiveness to the other.*"

[7] Davey (p. 229) refers to a "disposition of attentiveness" that is a *dialogical* disposition. He also says:

For all its seeming privacy the disciplines of attentiveness seek an opening for the self to receive the mediation of the transcendent in and through the mediation of language (230).

This is an almost Zen experience, such as William Blake obliquely acknowledges ("To see the world in a grain of sand, infinity in an hour"). Pitched to a higher level, it is the "enrapturement" that Hans Urs von Balthasar characterizes in aesthetic experience, or that Abraham Maslow has called a "peak experience," an experience of "Being" itself.

[8] Davey, p. 220. The same author refers to George Steiner, who, he says, finds "that attentiveness has an ethical dimension." Steiner "speaks of a civility towards 'the inward savour of things'" (Davey, p. 220 ref. p. 148).

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her youth, she became a convert to Catholicism in the 1980s, and her later poetry is often religious at its roots. In her second collection of poetry, *Here and Now*, published in 1957, she records the following close, attentive observation, in a poem titled, "A Silence."

> Among its petals the rose
> still holds
>   a few tears of the morning rain that
> broke it from its stem.
>   In each
> shines a speck of
>   red light, darker even
> than the rose.

One could analyze the detail of these perceptions, explaining how credibly they describe the particular event. We might also talk about the poem's indebtedness to the poems and poets that the young woman was reading at the time. But the poem goes on:

> Phoenix-tailed
> slateblue martins pursue
>   one another, spaced out
> in hopeless hope, circling
>   the porous clay vase, dark from
> the water in it. Silence
> surrounds the facts. A language
> still unspoken.[9]

Here are more precise descriptions, but what I want to emphasize is the quality of "attention" that this poem embodies and encourages; it almost obliges the reader to re-experience the poet's perception.[10] As we concentrate: on the rose petals, the drops of water, and the birds that circle a porous clay vase, we are drawn out of ourselves and into the world of the poem; a world whose authenticity the poet's detailed seeing underwrites.

In her third collection, *Overland to the Islands* (1958), in a poem called "The Palm Tree," the speaker observes a palm tree in southern France in the 1950s. After a night and "the mistral furious out of the black hills," the speaker observes the tree in the early morning wind.

> How the mule-eared palm, half paralyzed
> has quickened overnight! Scraping
> leaves beating!
>   (strained flags . . .)
> The palm tree in frenzy.

[9] Denise Levertov, *Collected Earlier Poems: 1940–1960* (New York: New Directions, 1979) p. 35.

[10] In *Real Presences* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989), Steiner stresses the importance of "re-cognition" in the aesthetic experience ("to re-cognize is to know anew") pp. 9 and 50.

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Watching attentively, the speaker searches for meaning, or the inspiration for a poem in the things observed. Attentiveness qualified by interest.

In the title poem of this collection, the speaker watches a dog as it sidles along the seashore:

> Under his feet
> rocks and mud, his imagination, sniffing,
> engaged in its perceptions – dancing
> edgeways, there's nothing
> the dog disdains on his way . . .[11]

In this poem, the dog is a model of the kind of attentiveness the poet seeks for herself. In her next collection, *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* (1960), one poem goes back to Levertov's experience as a nurse in England during World War II. It's called "The Dead."

> Earnestly I looked
> into their abandoned faces
> at the moment of death and while
> I bandaged their slack jaws and
> straightened waxy unresistant limbs and plugged
> the orifices with cotton
> but like everyone else I learned
> each time nothing new, only that
> as it were, a music, however harsh, that held us
> however loosely, had stopped, and left
> a heavy thick silence in its place.[12]

Here, directed to the somber sight of death and dying, the speaker's *attention* remains focused on perceptual details, even as larger questions arise. The credibility of her agnostic conclusions is again underwritten, at least in part, by the accuracy of her attentive observations. This is an objective seeing but also a kind of "seeing realities which lie just beyond what can easily be seen."[13]

In an essay written in 1968 ("Origins of a Poem"), Levertov refers to the role of attention in this way:

> The poet's task is to hold in trust the knowledge that language . . . is not a set of counters to be manipulated, but a Power. And only in this knowledge does he arrive at music, at that quality of song within speech which is not the result of manipulations of euphonious parts but of an attention, at once to the organic relationships of experienced

[11] *Collected Earlier Poems*, p. 55.
[12] *Collected Earlier Poems*, p. 103
[13] Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame U P, 1997), p. 83. Kerr also refers to Murdoch, and to Plato's *Republic*. As an essentially Romantic poet, Levertov believes in something like a world of Platonic forms.

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> phenomena and to the latent harmony and counterpoint of language itself as it is identified with those phenomena.[14]

A bit later in the essay she observes:

> 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. This is not to put the cart before the horse; some sense of identity, at which we wonder; an innocent self regard, which we see in infants and in the humblest forms of life; these come first, a center out of which Attention reaches. Without Attention – to the world outside us, to the voices within us – what poems could possibly come into existence?

Throughout the next several decades, one strength of Levertov's poetry — a strength learned from and encouraged by the poet William Carlos Williams — continued to be its close, attentive focus on things perceived. But as she reached the 1980s something of a change took place. She came to realize that such attentiveness has more than an aesthetic or even an ethical dimension. It has a religious dimension as well. To understand this element, it will be useful to provide some context.

In his collection of aphorisms titled *The Grain of Wheat*, Hans Urs von Balthasar quotes St. Basil:

> The bodily eye does not suffice to consider even a few of God's works. It is not satisfied with the unique contemplation of even one thing. After looking at it intently for a long while it still cannot tear itself away. How much less, then, will the eye of the soul suffice, even when it is lucid and awake, to consider the wonders and judgments of God.[15]

This passage describes one version of the poet's task — as it was developed in the Romantic era and as it held sway into the early twentieth-century poetic movement called Imagism. It certainly describes part of the goal and inspiration for Levertov, an inheritor of both traditions. She credits her mother for being a "pointer out-er." "Look, the snowdrop has come up" and "Look, there's a crocus."[16] And, as we have already begun to see, Levertov is her mother's (poetic) daughter. She too is one who points things out for our attention.

Elsewhere in *The Grain of Wheat* Balthasar connects such attentiveness with the appetite for mystery:

> All things can be considered in two ways: as fact and as mystery. Simple people, farmers, for instance, can often integrate both ways in a lovely harmony. In children it would for the most part be easy

[14] *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 54.

[15] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1995), p. 2.

[16] "An Interview with Denise Levertov," *Renascence* 50, nos. 1&2 (1997–98), p. 9.

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> to develop a sense for mystery; but teachers and parents can seldom generate enough humility to speak of it.[17]

Levertov, too, was alive to "mystery," but a discussion of that topic would lead us too far afield. Suffice to say: by the intensity of her attentiveness she helps us to contemplate, often, just one thing; or a few related things, yielding a selfless, almost "objective" view. Or she presents us with a few things juxtaposed in space, or time, or memory. And the effect is, increasingly, delight, or joy. In a reflection of his own — following the Basil quotation — Balthasar notes: "You will plunge most deeply into the foundation of existence if you consider *delight* to be the essence of your being. Hegel's infinite superiority to Schopenhauer. Absolute being is absolute delight."[18]

In letter seventeen of his *Letters to Malcolm*, C. S. Lewis addresses the issue of "delight," though he uses the term, "pleasure," which his correspondent had defended in secular terms years before. Now, after qualifications about evil and suffering in the world, Lewis tries to persuade his correspondent that 'pleasures are shafts of the glory as it strikes our sensibility," where "glory" means the glory of God. "I have tried," he says, "since that moment, to make every pleasure into a channel of adoration."[19]

Lewis spends the next few pages trying to describe and defend the position that "to experience the tiny theophany is itself to adore" (90). At one point he acknowledges the difficulty. "I don't always achieve it. One obstacle is inattention. Another is the wrong kind of attention.... A third obstacle is greed."(90). His argument is a familiar one: unless we can be attentive to God's presence in the everyday events of life, we won't know them in the more momentous — or even the more painful — events.

> At best, our faith and reason will tell us that He is adorable, but we shall not have *found* him so, not have "tasted and seen." Any patch of sunlight in a wood will show you something about the sun which you could never get from reading books on astronomy.[20]

Returning to the issue of pleasure, he concludes:

> These pure and spontaneous pleasures are "patches of Godlight" in the woods of our experience.[21]

[17] The Grain of Wheat, p. 20.

[18] *The Grain of Wheat*, p. 3. In his lectures on aesthetics Hegel approaches something like the issue of attentiveness when he discusses prosaic consciousness.

[19] C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), p. 89.

[20] *O Taste and See* is the title of another Levertov collection of poetry; that title being taken from a poem of the same name.

[21] Letters to Malcolm, p. 91.

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Defending himself against his correspondent's assumed criticism of such a "frivolous" view, Lewis gets us closer to the real issue:

> I do *not* think that the life of Heaven bears any analogy to play or dance in respect of frivolity. I do think that while we are in this "valley of tears," cursed with labour, hemmed round with necessities, tripped up with frustrations, doomed to perpetual plannings, puzzlings, and anxieties, certain qualities that must belong to the celestial condition have no chance to get through, can project no image of themselves, except in activities which, for us here and now, are frivolous.[22]

Noting that "it is only in our 'hours off,' only in our moments of permitted festivity, that we find an analogy [for heaven]," Lewis concludes the letter by observing that "joy is the serious business of heaven."[23] Despite the complexity and ubiquity of evil, suffering and injustice —such as that in Levertov's "The Dead," and other examples which I shall consider again later — this delight is what Levertov offers in poems throughout her career, but particularly in those from the last decade of her life.

One might say that Lewis gives a new and deeper meaning to an old justification for poetry as a "permitted festivity," a chance to look at the world attentively, without the acquisitive, manipulative, or exploitive attitude we take toward much of life. It is a measure of how far we have accepted (uncritically, I might add) the scientific, technological, and ideological paradigm[24] as well as subjectivist psychology that we are no longer able to acknowledge the power that the objective, factual world has to release us — as Murdoch suggests — from the selfish perspective. And, as a result, we are no longer able to experience "delight," "enjoy" life, let alone "enjoy" poetry that celebrates the joy of life.[25] A poem that reflects upon this sense of joy comes from Levertov's 1967 collection, The *Sorrow Dance*.[26] The first short stanza — following an epigraph from Henry David Thoreau —presents the words of an eighty-year-old woman:

> Joy, the, 'well . . . *joyfulness* of
> Joy' — 'many years
> I had not known it,' the woman of eighty
> said, 'only remembered, till now.'

Alluding to Emerson, Traherne, and Rilke — in dialogue or counterpoint with the further reflections of the eighty year old woman

[22] *Letters to Malcolm*, p. 92.

[23] *Letters to Malcolm,* p. 93.

[24] See John Macmurray, *Religion, Art and Music* (Liverpool: The Liverpool Press, 1961) for a cogent explanation of how and why this may have occurred.

[25] Chinua Achebe speaks of the power of literature to "celebrate existence" in "African Literature as Restoration of Celebration" in *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration*, Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford ed. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991), pp. 1–11.

[26] Denise Levertov, *The Sorrow Dance* (New York: New Directions, 19), pp. 183–185.

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— and sounding like Balthasar on "delight," the poem goes on to emphasize the centrality of joy and delight, especially as a person reaches maturity and beyond. The poem reminds us how easy it can be to lose a sense of joy — perhaps for a long time — only to be re-collected to that joy, even if only late in life.[27]

Throughout her long career Levertov celebrated the delight and intense joy that comes from attending to, and creating a poetic response to ordinary as well as extraordinary instances of beauty (and ugliness[28]), in nature, in art, in human actions. This attentiveness is founded on, grows out of, her awareness of evil and suffering; and her commitment to revealing (largely through her poetry) the genuinely real, beautiful, and human aspects of the world.

What accounts for Levertov's attentiveness, this emphasis on joy, even amidst the suffering? Perhaps it can be explained, in part, by the illness that would take her life. She lived for years with cancer in remission. It would not be uncommon for the sense of the preciousness of life, and of time, to have encouraged that attentiveness. We could say that a sense of fleeting time inspired her work; as it has done for poets as diverse as Catullus, Francois Villon and Andrew Marvell. Yet, if the sense of mortality sharpened her attentiveness, it did not change her attitude toward time. To learn to be attentive takes time. It also takes a different attitude toward time from the frenetic one about which we usually complain.[29]

In the fifteenth of *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis has the senior devil, Screwtape, give his subordinate devil, Wormwood, a lecture on the use and abuse of time.

> Humans live in time but our Enemy [God] destines them for eternity. He, therefore, . . . wants them to attend chiefly to two things, to eternity itself, and to that point of time which they call the Present. For the Present is the point at which time touches eternity. Of the present moment, and of it only, humans have an experience analogous to the experience which our Enemy has of reality as a whole; in it alone freedom and actuality are offered them . . . .
> Gratitude looks to the past and love to the present; fear, avarice, lust, and ambition look ahead.[30]

[27] Bernard Basset, S.J., in *The Noon-Day Devil* (Fresno, CA: Academy Guild Press, 1964), cites John Macmurray (pp. 79–80) and enjoins "sensitive awareness," "living in the senses." This is what Levertov's poetry teaches. Basset says that "sensitive awareness" redirects us, away from a selfish perspective that can become habitual in middle and old age.

[28] In the *Poetics* Aristotle discusses the complicated "joy" that comes in really seeing the representation of even evil and ugliness (Chapter IV) in Hazard Adams ed. *Critical Theory Since Plato* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1992), p. 51.

[29] See *Grain of Wheat* p. 4: "Time is the fully unfolded intensity of love, since within Time love can take on the wonderful meaning of a story, of a process . . . ."

[30] C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), pp. 76–77.

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Screwtape's reflection is one that we human beings would all do well to heed. In *Letters to Malcolm*, Lewis comes at the topic of time from a slightly different angle. Responding to his correspondent's difficulty — "that the dead are not in time" — here is how he speculates about their experience.

> How do you know they are not? . . . The dead might experience a time, which was not quite so linear as ours — it might, so to speak, have thickness as well as length. Already in this life we get some thickness whenever we learn to attend to more than one thing at once. One can suppose this increased to any extent, so that though, for them as for us, the present is always becoming the past, yet each present contains imaginably more than ours.[31]

Now it is a truism that our culture urges us to move at an ever more frantic pace, always with an eye to the future, most often with an eye to maximizing our profit from or control over some aspect of that future (recall how, earlier, Lewis had said greed can spoil attentiveness).[32] Yet might it not be precisely because we don't really "attend" intensely, in the present, that we are not able to experience this "thickening," which is the concentration of our present. How can we hope to re-capture — restore — that habit of attentiveness, that awareness of the present?

We are not talking here about the Romantic "moment" or the Modernist "epiphany." Certainly not Faust's "*Verweile dich, du bist so schön*" which is, in fact, damnable. As should be clear by now, I am arguing that poets like Levertov can be teachers of that rare attentiveness. Another poet, Kathleen Norris, relates attentiveness to a sense of prayer. Norris puts it this way:

> Prayer is not doing, but being. It is not words but the beyond-words experience of coming into the presence of something much greater than oneself. It is an invitation to recognize holiness, and to utter simple words — "Holy, Holy, Holy" — in response. Attentiveness is all; I sometimes think of prayer as a certain quality of attention that comes upon me when I'm busy doing something else.[33]

[31] *Letters to Malcolm*, pp. 109–110.

[32] Scientists, too, tell us that our attention affects our sense of time. See "Remembering When," by Antonio R. Damasio *Scientific American* 287.3 (September, 2002), pp. 66–69.

[33] Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), "Prayer as Mystery" p. 350. If Norris's straightforward approach is not convincing, consider Gerald Bruns' quotation from Jean-Luc Marion (in a dense, dense essay on Lyotard, Levinas, and Marion), "The Senses of Augustine (On Some of Lyotard's Remains)," *Religion and Literature* 33.3 (2001). There he notes: "As Jean-Luc Marion says, praise is the only discourse that can traverse without abolishing the distance that draws us close to God": "The Discourse of Praise" *Idol and Distance* (1977; New York: Fordham U P, 2001), pp. 184–91. Thomas Keating disagrees: Intent, not attention is paramount. *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (New York: Continuum, 1986, 1992), pp. 73–74.

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Simone Weil also writes about an attention that "suspends thought, leaving it available, empty and penetrable by its object."[34] It is "not looking for anything but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is going to penetrate it" (93).[35] For Weil, this attention brings us closer to God, but only to the extent that love of one's neighbor is "of the same stuff," "*de la même substance*" (96). That "certain quality of attentiveness" is both a deeper living in the present at the same time it is a form of prayer. Levertov's poetry, especially that from her last three published volumes — and the posthumous collection, This *Great Unknowing* — is about precisely this kind of attentiveness.[36]

Even when a poet like Levertov pays close attention to something evil or ugly, we know *that*, and *how* it is ugly. The quality of attention, the intensity of attentiveness are such (and the particular expression as well) that they make — may I say "painfully" — clear the shape, the contours, if not the actual consequences of such evil or ugliness. In the matter of suffering — if not evil — Weil has also shown how genuinely selfless attention can discover and transform what one looks upon attentively:

> Those who suffer have no other need in this world than of people capable of paying attention to them. The ability to pay attention to another's suffering is a very rare, very difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle .... The fullness of love for your neighbor is simply being able to ask him: what are you going through? It is knowing that the suffering person exists, not as a unit in a collection,[[37]] not as an exemplar of a social category labeled "unfortunate," but as a human being, exactly like us, who has been stricken and marked inimitably by suffering. For that, it is sufficient, but indispensable, to know how to direct toward him a certain gaze.[38]

[34] Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: Fayard, 1966), pp. 96–97. Translated by Andrew McKenna in "Rorty, Girard, and the Novel," *Renascence* 55.4 (Summer 2003), p. 92.

[35] Weil also states that a sense of our own mediocrity, even obtuseness ("*bêtise*"), can be favorable to such attention, as can be the travail of peasants and workers to the extent that their long-suffering condition immunizes them from delusions of social preeminence, of "*considération social*" (96).

[36] Steven Schloesser, "'Not behind but within': *Sacramentum et res*," *Renascence* 58 no 1 (2005), p. 35, has pointed out that Levertov had some acquaintance with Weil's writings, particularly in a piece called "On the Art of Prayer," (1990), in which she quotes from Weil on attention: "... absolutely unmixed attention is prayer. Extreme attention is what constitutes the creative faculty in man and only extreme attention is religious," in Sian Miles, ed., *Simone Weil: An Anthology* (New York: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1986), p. 212.

[37] This is an issue which W. H. Auden addresses in one of the T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures titled "Words and the Word," *Secondary Worlds* (London: Faber, 1968), pp. 120–21.

[38] Simone Weil, p. 311.

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In such an attentive state it may even be possible to see and experience, united, three of the transcendentals: truth, goodness, and beauty dawning from the two.

It has been a misconception perpetuated by both poets and critics that the poet seeks to cultivate sensitive self-awareness. This is the cliché that Gilbert and Sullivan — in *Patience* — exaggerated as they perpetrated the legend over one hundred and twenty years ago. Yes, the poet —like any artist — is frequently more sensitive to forms of beauty and ugliness. That may make the artist or poet seem more self-centered and exaggeratedly self-aware. But from Keats through Eliot and beyond, poets — not to mention philosophers like Murdoch, or Hans-Georg Gadamer — have affirmed that it is not *self*-awareness that they cultivate and esteem. It is the ability to use conscious awareness to become acutely observant and then to create art or poetry — or philosophy — that presents that world to us. If anything, it is a loss of self-awareness; loss of the self – almost merging subject and object — that they seek. Witness Keats's identification with the nightingale in his famous "Ode." Witness, also, T. S. Eliot's famed defense of "impersonality" in poetry.[39] Gadamer, for his part, urges the participants in a genuine conversation to be full of the matter [*die Sachen*] they are discussing. To surrender oneself to a conversation is like the experience of attentive seeing, understanding — and communicating or sharing.[40]

So — does the poet seek to "cultivate" self-awareness? Some do. A saving qualification and a different perspective comes at the end of another aphorism that Balthasar records:

> The deeper, therefore, one's love of self, the closer it is to the love of God, which does not abolish the former. This is said ontologically speaking, without prejudice to a practical education in the love of God, which naturally cannot be attained through introversion but only through the 'leap out of oneself'.[41]

Though Weil would (probably not too respectfully) disagree, the best poets — like Keats, Rilke, and Levertov — are forever leaping out of self in this way, in order to attend to, understand, and celebrate the creaturely world in all its beauty, in all its suffering. Gabriel

[39] In another selection from her works, *Waiting for God*, translated by Emma Craufurd, with an Introduction by Leslie Fielder (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), Weil is quoted as saying that the work of genius, or "work of the very highest order, true creation, means self-loss."

[40] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Semantics and Hermeneutics," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 87–88, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 102. Or again —with Balthasar — we might say: "perfect (intuitive) self-awareness would be an awareness of one's own origin from God and thus an indirect intuition of God" (*Grain of Wheat*), p. 6.

[41] *Ibid.*

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Marcel has an insight here: he says, "The more we are able to know the individual being, the more we shall be oriented, and as it were directed towards, a grasp of being as such."[42]

As I now turn to a few poems from her last collections, I would like to argue that Levertov's poetry, as a practice of attentiveness, is analogous to and even a stimulus to the kind of prayer which seeks to understand and celebrate as it gives thanks for the mysteries of life. But, as noted earlier, it will first be necessary to take into account the reality of evil, injustice, and suffering, which Levertov never forgot, and which was never absent from her poetry. The politically, ideologically "attuned" will say: what's to enjoy? The world **is** full of hate, bigotry, and oppression. And even discounting the way the media and wider culture shape our revulsions as well as our desires, there is a weight of evil and suffering in the world. And Levertov never denied it. In fact, some of her most powerful poetry results from staring squarely in the eye of evil, oppression, and the people responsible for it. Here is "The Batterers," from the collection *Evening Train* — where it comes between a poem about a young man with AIDs and one about the United States Navy flying team, the Blue Angels.[43]

A man sits by the bed
of a woman he has beaten,
dresses her wounds,
gingerly dabs at bruises.
Her blood pools about her,
darkens.

Astonished, he finds he's begun
to cherish her. He is terrified.
Why had he never
seen, before, what she was?
What if she stops breathing?

Earth, can we not love you
unless we believe the end is near?
Believe in your life
unless we think you are dying?[44]

The poem begins with a close, attentive look at the scene. The view is subtly sparse and — perhaps deliberately — somewhat general. Only the last sentence of the first stanza becomes more specific, and

[42] Gabriel Marcel, "Creative Fidelity" in *Creative Fidelity* (New York: Fordham U P, 2002), p. 148.
[43] Weil refers to its being an "unprecedented time," a time for saintliness; *Waiting for God*, pp. 98–99.
[44] Denise Levertov, *Evening Train.* (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 71.

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as it does so, carries an ominous undertone. How much blood has the woman lost? Where, precisely, does it pool?[45]

The second stanza turns its focus to the batterer, and his thoughts. The first word, "astonished," is jarring. It implies a quality we ordinarily think of as positive. Astonishment, like awe, can be a consequence of attention. We can be astonished at the beauty of a sunset, or a lake at dawn. But here it is an abusive male who is said to feel "astonished" at an apparent change of attitude in himself. Here Levertov marks a familiar stage in the pattern of abuse. After beating the woman, the man seems aware of what he's done. Again, the last sentence of the stanza carries a charge. Is he really fearful that the woman might die? How badly did he beat her?

The final stanza turns away from the scene that the first two stanzas have sketched. The speaker asks the first of two questions that generalize the application of the story told in stanzas one and two. These questions are directed to all who read the poem. Implicating us, they ask, first, whether all human beings only value something when "the end is near." The last clause is ambiguous. Whose end? What kind of end? How near? The next question, sounding like an afterthought, because it implies the first part of the question: "Earth, can we not . . ." specifies — but only partly — the ambiguity of whose "end." The second question proposes that the people of the earth seem unable to value the "life" of earth until it seems the earth itself is dying. Juxtaposing physical violence to a person and ecological violence under the category of "abuse," Levertov achieves a kind of paradox. Attentiveness yields receptivity and understanding, yes. Delight and gratitude? Only intimated, perhaps, in the absence of love and care that these detailed perceptions bring to light. The quality of expression identifies what is evil.

A final poem will show how close attentiveness approximates a form of prayer, a sensitive awareness, an attentive waiting upon the specific experiences, those moments that reveal God's presence. This is "Translucence," from the posthumous collection, *This Great Unknowing*.

> Once I understood (till I forget, at least)
> the immediacy of new life, Vita Nuova,
> redemption not stuck in linear delays,
> I perceived also (for now) the source
> of unconscious light in faces
> I believe are holy; not quite transparent,
> more like the half-opaque whiteness
> of Japanese screens or lampshades,

[45] One would like to speculate. Is Levertov writing about a real event, a scene described in the paper, or perhaps reported on TV or shown in a movie? Cf. Wordsworth's "imagining" the vivid scene in "A Solitary Reaper."

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grass or petals imbedded in that paper-thin
substance which is not paper as this is paper,
and which permits the passage of what is luminous
though forms remain unseen behind its protection.
I perceived that in such faces, through
the translucence we see, the light we intuit
is of the already resurrected, each
a Lazarus, but a Lazarus (man or woman)
without the memory of tomb or of any
swaddling bands except perhaps
the comforting ones of their first
infant hours, the warm receiving-blanket...
They know of themselves nothing different
from anyone else. This great unknowing
is part of their holiness. They are always trying
to share out joy as if it were cake or water,
something ordinary, not rare at all.[46]

Closely attending to a particular feature glimpsed in certain faces, this poem weaves a fabric from some of Levertov's favorite images and themes. Always interested in art, particularly art that sought to convey a mystery, Levertov chooses as a first analogy for the "translucent" quality of certain people's lives and faces the "opaque whiteness/of Japanese screens or lampshades." The second analogy draws upon her interest in the experience of death and resurrection.[47]

The final analogy is that of infanthood. Suddenly sounding like a twentieth-century commentary on William Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode, the poem compares the unconscious quality of those "faces/I believe are holy" to infants. These holy ones remember nothing from before their "resurrection" (that is, their birth) nothing save, perhaps, "the warm receiving-blanket." Finally, trying to convey that unconscious sense of ordinariness, Levertov tries to express a sense of how these people act. These holy ones, she says, are always trying to share the experience that they *live*. But the "joy" they seek to share, 'as if it were cake or water," is — to the speaker — anything but ordinary. Shared out by those who experience "this great unknowing," the holy ones make *real* the rarity of things in everyday life. As Simone Weil affirmed about our treatment of the poor and suffering, selfless actions, attentively carried out, awaken the sense of rarity for the person so treated. And such rarity is a form of respect and valuing.

As I noted at the start, the poetry of Denise Levertov — at its best — embodies a sensitive awareness, an attentive waiting upon the

[46] Denise Levertov, *This Great Unknowing* (New York: New Directions, 1999) p. 48.

[47] In an earlier poem, "Ascension," she had sought to "impersonate" Jesus at his Ascension. But the poem also compared that ascension to the Resurrection, which also alluded to Lazarus's rising.

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moments that block, or reveal, God's presence. Perhaps made more acute by the wound of an illness, she persevered in her witness to both the evil, injustice and ugliness in late twentieth-century life; but even more to those experiences of transcendent and ordinary beauty that await those who look and feel, and pray, attentively. Like her poetic models, Keats, Hopkins and Rilke, she was always at pains to be awake, "attentive," and this means a "continual readiness to receive the unexpected, to embrace things we have not learned by rote."[48] To pay attention, then, is our task. It is a challenge to live in that present that Lewis says is our only — though transitory — possession; striving for a wakeful attentiveness that is openness and receptivity, and which is also peace and selfless joy; as translucent (if not transparent) as the light of God that shines on all. And we can take further heart when we remember that, as Lewis says, "Joy is the serious business of heaven."[49]

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[48] *The Grain of Wheat*, pp. 112–113.
[49] *Letters to Malcolm*, p. 93.

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