

Sophie B. Blaydes

Metaphors of Life and Death in the Poetry of Denise Levertov and Sylvia Plath

According to Aristotle, metaphor is "the greatest thing by far. . . . It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius. . . ."¹ Metaphors compare; in good metaphors, the comparisons enable us to see more clearly. The poetry of Sylvia Plath and Denise Levertov possesses that sign of genius and provides us with insights into life and death. Their poems are metaphors, emblems of their lives. Plath's poems are violent—they negate life; Levertov's are contemplative—they celebrate life. Plath justifies death through art; Levertov awakens to life through art. For each, poetry is not only the way to understand life, but it is life itself. Through their work, the two poets present an odd congruity, one as a victim, the other as victor. Where Plath sees and absorbs the sickness of a sick world, Levertov discovers and applies the antidote for that sickness. Both describe the diseases of our time through personal yet universal metaphors; Plath's are metaphors of violence and defeat; Levertov's are of anguish and endurance.

In Plath's poetry, the metaphors are painful and destructive, They are of ". . . a cut, a contusion . . . thalidomide, fever, an accident, a wound, paralysis, a burial, animal and human sacrifice," heretic burning, war-torn lands, extermination camps. One critic called her poetry a "garden of tortures".² That garden is defined by a rigid metaphorical scheme where life is represented by color, rhythm, and heat and where death is antithetically black, white, stasis, and cold. Plath has used her metaphorical scheme to translate and absorb events in her life; she has re-ordered and interpreted her life through her poetry and has then come to control its events through a personal mythos of metaphors and images. For Plath, the "blood jet is poetry," and it leads to death.³

For Levertov, poetry "reverberates through . . . life . . ."⁴; her images and metaphors celebrate life. She too responds through her poetry to her

experiences, but her response has a vitality because poetry to Levertov is a life force. She has said that "the interaction of life on art and of art on life is continuous. Poetry is necessary to a whole man . . . (it must not be) divided from the rest of life. . . . Both life and poetry fade, wilt, shrink, when they are divorced."⁵ She says of the true artist that he

. . . draws out all from his heart,
work with delight, makes things with calm, with sagacity,
. . . composes his objects, works dexterously, invents;

arranges materials, adorns them, makes them adjust.⁶

She says in another poem, "Pleasures,"

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

within something of another nature,
in repose distinct.⁷

And so she can find "imagination made fur" in a cat, or affirm her identity by rejecting a limp, clean, empty dress, or describe innocence through a Mexican family going to a movie.

Both Plath and Levertov question the nature and value of man's life, and they convey their contrasting visions of reality in clear, vigorous images and metaphors. The poets' antithetical answers arise paradoxically from corresponding experiences. Plath was born in Boston in 1932 and died in London in 1963, a suicide; Levertov was born in London in 1923 and lives now in New England. Both married writers.⁸ Comparable worlds have for these two women generated opposite responses. Yet, despite their differences, the two women speak to the reader, who is caught by the truth of the images; their duality suggests the complexity of life and our ambivalence in responding to it. The poets define the contradictory moods and attitudes of modern man through their metaphors.

Plath's poem "Daddy" and Levertov's "During the Eichmann Trial" demonstrate the poets' contradictory views of a modern reality. Plath's vision is negative and violent; Levertov's is positive and vital. Where one sees life, the other sees death. Where one feels hope, the other feels despair. Where one teaches, the other destroys. Plath's poem "Daddy" becomes a persuasive polemic for death through her metaphor. As she suggested of her later poetry, "Daddy" should be read aloud because its

strength increases through the sound of the words and the rhythmic patterns of the stanzas. The cumulative sound of the poem becomes a metaphor for the harsh, implacable message which is death by murder.

The effect of metaphorical sound is not accidental. Plath may speak unconventional ideas of vampires and group murder, but they are presented in traditional, albeit personalized forms. The poem has 16 stanzas of five lines each. Plath characteristically uses a stanza, but her ideas threaten to break through the restrictions and undermine the ordered form of the stanzas. Such a traditional poetic device as the stanza becomes a container for her insane world.

While it has no conventional rhyme scheme, the poem is dominated by rhyme. The long—oo sound appears six times in the first line: "*You do not do. You do not do.*" The sound increases in frequency until it appears in the last five stanzas clearly 25 times and four times in off-rhymes. The repeated —oo sound increases the tempo; it intensifies the impact by charging the poem with the pain and power of its restrictive sound, —oo. The sound not only increases the tempo and intensifies the tone of the poem, but it also becomes a metaphor of the pain and frenzy of the poet's experience.

Adding to the sound pattern is Plath's effective use of rhythm. The poem is comprised basically of iambs, with some anapests and spondees. Aristotle was the first to tell us that the iamb is the rhythm closest to ordinary speech—a fact that coincidentally applies to both Greek and English. Plath has used conventional rhythm for the poem, yet the effect of the rhythm is unconventional. The first lines of "Daddy" are startling. They contain the certainty and the simplicity of a nursery rhyme.

You do not do. You do not do
 Any more, black shoe
 In which I have lived like a foot
 For thirty years, poor and white,
 Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

The rhythm is reassuring, and, like the odd horrors of the nursery rhyme, the bizarre situation of "Daddy" is accepted because a sense of order is imposed on a hideous reality.

Plath's diction adds to the hideous reality; it is startlingly simple. Specifically, of the 515 words in the poem, only 75 are polysyllabic; 85 percent of the poem is monosyllabic. In addition, the word order of the statements is normal. Plath uses few adjectives—about three per stanza.

The words are not extraordinary, but they are highly charged by the rhythm, the sound patterns, and the context in which they are placed. The simplicity of the poem's diction is timeless and lends an air of universality to a highly personal dilemma.

"Daddy" may open simply and directly as a nursery rhyme,⁹ but it closes with the intensity of a martial air or the frenzy of a religious ecstasy. The poem's movement may be compared to a military cadence that grows louder and becomes more emotional or to a religious exaltation that carries the curse of vengeance and death. The tempo and intensity of the poem become metaphors for Plath's association of the world of the poem with the world of the nursery. In the poem, the rhythm and tone vie against the content, just as the speaker struggles and loses her identity as she gives herself to a force. In the poem, the poet becomes part of an ordered, ecstatic experience that denies individuality and reason.

Plath's poem is psychologically persuasive through its sound and rhythm; it is intellectually persuasive through its imagery. The images in "Daddy" are startling, yet consistent with Plath's personal mythos and the tone of the poem. Black—her emblem for death or evil—occurs in "black shoe," "black swastika," "blackboard," "the black man," "a man in black," "black telephone," and, finally, "your fat black heart."

The shoe is one of the first of many highly charged images; it moves in two compelling directions: on the one hand, it supports the nursery rhyme motif that is suggested by the rhythm,

You do not do. You do not do
Any more, black shoe . . .

We are in the world of the old lady who lived in a shoe, a world where one calls one's father "Daddy." But "black shoe" quickly becomes part of the sinister Nazi motif that builds throughout the poem. The black shoe is the Fascist boot, the *Fuerher*, that father who has controlled her for 30 years. In the first stanza, the poet rejects the black shoe that has contained her, "barely daring to breathe or Achoo." Her life and her will have been subjugated to those of her father. The black shoe is then a metaphor for her past, her suffocated spirit.

The black shoe is the first of a series of metaphors of Fascism that build the argument of the poem. Plath uses words with Germanic sounds of Fascistic nuances, although she begins with a kind of nursery innocence with the word "Achoo." The child-like tone of that first stanza is completed by "Achoo," a word that carries a double suggestion: it

is the child's word for sneeze, but it is also a hint of the heavier, more sinister Germanic sounds that follow: 'Ach, du,' 'Ich, ich, ich,' 'luft-waffe,' 'Panzer-man,' 'Meinkampf.'

As she loses her child-like tone, the poet becomes a Jew, and the basic metaphor is now more threatening and violent. The images include "Polack," "barb wire snare," "Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen," "gypsy," and "Jew," "Jew," "Jew." As we move with her through the poem and see her assume these identities, Plath becomes a victim, a woman without will. She is tortured; she becomes an individual without identity. Through the poem Plath forces her personal plight into a public trauma so that she, like the Jews, is abandoned. She was abandoned by her father, her daddy; the Jews were abandoned by the Fuehrer. They were destroyed by him, their father; so she continues the parallel, whereby she too is carried by a wave of murder and destruction. Her father had "bit my pretty red heart in two." When she was 10, he died; at 20, she tried suicide; then she married another Fascist: "A man in black with a Meinkampf look/Above a love of the rack and the screw." Inevitably, she identified with the Jews, who are victims, because she, like them, is tortured and persecuted.

She is ambivalent toward her father, whom she loves and hates. She knows she is a victim, but she detaches herself from her experience, with the shadow of a will. By the end of the poem, she is violent as she rejects and kills, but her actions are part of a mass response where she loses her individuality. The violence of the action is propelled by the incantatory tone and form of the poem—she is part of a selfless motion that builds hypnotically, with frenzy, until she is driven to an act of passion. But even that act is a group act—when she kills, she kills facelessly in a vengeful, hating crowd.

If there is love in the poem, it is painful: "Every woman adores a Fascist." To Plath, love is brutal, and it is mixed with hate. It is "the rack and the screw." At the end of the poem, she joins a village in a primitive ritual.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
 And the villagers never liked you,
 They are dancing and stamping on you.
 They always *knew* it was you,
 Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

The poem ends hopelessly. The counterpoint of the child's cry with the bitter accusation "Daddy, daddy, you bastard . . ." is hideous, startling, compelling. The poem contains no hope, unless death is that hope.

Aristotle defined tragedy in therapeutic, positive terms. Tragedy to him has a social function because it provides an emotional release, a catharsis, for the members of an audience. The individual pities the dilemma of the tragic hero and fears that he too could suffer excessive punishment. Plath's dilemma, her tragedy, is described in pitiless terms; she presents an individual's tragedy but in artificial or large terms. The artifice of the nursery rhyme and the absorption of the Fascist victimization of the Jews provide bases that do not invite catharsis. Plath, however, effects her own catharsis through death. The ritual death of Daddy, alone, will free her from the pain and persecution of love which was caused by her father's actual death 20 years earlier.

The poem is intimate and terrifying, and, according to A.R. Jones, it ". . . is committed to the view that the ethos of love/brutality is the dominant historical ethos of the last thirty years."¹⁰ So, her tortured mind reflects the tortured age through the historical events of concentration camps, Fascism, and violence. To some, then, the poem is an emblem of our age, which is defined as "schizophrenic, torn, between brutality and love."¹¹ The love that Plath presents in the poem denies life; she seeks a release from love and discovers that death alone can provide it.

The poem is metaphorically charged in its form and its imagery. Through its structure and cadence and its monosyllabic diction, "Daddy" presents the reader with a violent act of passion in traditional and universal terms. As Jones writes, ". . . we are persuaded almost to cooperate with the destructive principle—indeed to love the principle as life itself."¹² He sees Plath's poetry as the product of a deranged mind because "in a deranged world, a deranged response is the only possible reaction of the sensitive mind."¹³ Such a statement denies that we may find beauty, order, and health in our time. That view leaves us with the visionary who perceives chaos and then self-destructs. To A.E. Dyson, Plath's "amazing poems . . . are not the expression only, but the transmutation, of suffering . . . they are in the highest degree creative art, and . . . in art, there is healing of a kind."¹⁴ But Plath's healing in "Daddy" is murderous. Even after the ritual murder, the apparent purgation at the end of the poem does not resolve her dilemma. She remains a victim-murderer.

Yet most of us would agree with Aristotle that poetry provides aesthetic outlets for our emotions—not only our rage or frustrations but also our love and joy. To embrace a negative, destructive vision of love and life is to ignore the variety of man and his resilience—his capacity

for pain, his ability to find beauty and joy in life. Just as Plath's work should not be celebrated because she is a suicide, Levertov's should not suffer critically because of her psychic health. Instead of using her poetry for exorcism of demons or affirmations of destruction, Levertov finds meaning in life, ". . . a form in all things (and in our experience) which the poet can discover and reveal."¹⁵ To Levertov, the poet is a seer, an interpreter. She has said that ". . . the poet stands open-mouthed in the temple of life, contemplating his experience (and) there come to him the first words of the poem: . . ."¹⁶ The poet, to Levertov, transforms experiences into words with "A religious devotion to the truth, to the splendor of the authentic, (involving) the writer in a process rewarding in itself; but when that devotion brings us to undreamed abysses and we find ourselves sailing over them and landing on the other side—that's ecstasy."¹⁷

Both Plath and Levertov suggest through their poems an ecstasy that encompasses them and the reader, but one reaches a frenzy of death and murder, the other an impetus and a commitment to life. Levertov's affirmations of life are clearly revealed even in the titles of her anthologies: for example, one is *To Stay Alive* (poems), another *The Poet in the World* (essays). In these works, subjects range from her sister's death to protests against the Vietnamese War to her poetic credo. Each becomes a metaphor for the significance of man and the need to live. Her short poem "The Tulips" demonstrates her use of the imagists' techniques.¹⁸ The poem is also the subject of one of Levertov's essays where she explains her creative process.¹⁹ Like the imagists, she strives for the utmost concentration.

Red tulips
living into their death
flushed with a wild blue

tulips
becoming wings
ears of the wind
jackrabbits rolling their eyes

west wind
shaking the loose pane

some petals fall
with that sound one
listens for

The images in the poem arose from a simple experience. She had received a "bunch of red tulips."²⁰ The first lines suggest the basic thesis:

the tulips were fully alive up to "their last moments. They hadn't given up before the end," The third line recalls that tulips turn blue as they die, which reminded Levertov of the flush on the cheeks of a fevered person. "Wild blue" seemed appropriate because it suggested the color of a wild sky at sunset. The next four lines describe the movement of the tulips' petals; as they darken, they also turn back. The petals seemed to be like wings; and they also became the long ears of the jackrabbits, who in a state of ecstasy would roll their eyes. The "west wind/shaking the loose pane" was, she said, "pure observation." "The flowers were on the window sill, and the pane of glass was loose, and the wind blew and rattled the pane."²¹

The last three lines simply describe that loosening of the petals in death; ". . . perhaps that death was hastened by the blowing of the west wind, . . ." She had noticed that "there is a little sound when a petal falls. . . . a sound like the breath of a human being who is dying; it stops, and one has been sitting by the bedside, and one didn't even know it, but one was in fact waiting for just that sound, and the sound is the equivalent of that silence."²² The line then is broken where the silence is.

The poem is more than an image for her reality; for Levertov, it becomes a metaphor for life translated from her experience. It, too, may teach and persuade because it demonstrates a life force. She said that

. . . a poet, a verbal kind of person, is constantly talking to himself, inside of himself, constantly approximating and evaluating and trying to grasp his experience in words. And the 'sound,' inside his head, of that voice is not necessarily identical with his literal speaking voice, nor is his inner vocabulary identical with that which he uses in conversation. At their best sound and words are song, not speech. The written poem is a record of that inner song.²³

The poem is carefully, skillfully articulated. Levertov, like Plath, uses charged language that is simple and direct. Both achieve comparable effect by monosyllabic diction and by traditional but unconventional rhythmic sound patterns. Plath uses iambs and anapests; Levertov uses spondees, trochees, and pauses. There is a music to "The Tulips," but it is a gentle, quiet music that alerts and soothes us, just as we are alerted to death in life and yet are soothed by death when death is a silence or a stillness that holds no terror. It is only an absence of sound and motion. The music is effected by the sounds of the words as well as their emphasis. *Tulips* is repeated in the fourth line, reminding us of the flower and providing an odd rhyming pattern from line 1 to line 4. The short *i* of *tulips* is repeated in *wind/wind/with*. The *w* is repeated in

wings/wind/wind/with/west. The *n* is repeated in *wind* and *wings*. The rhymes or repeated sounds are not prominent. They suggest a continuity, but they do not stress through rhyme, rhythm, or image. Instead we find a quiet affirmation of life and an easy acceptance of death through a poem that is natural. It is a metaphor of Levertov's basic thesis—we live until we must die, until a wind, an event, shakes us from our hold on life. We break loose into death silently.

That same individualistic view of life that humanizes every object, whether it is a tulip or a dress, significantly persists when Levertov observes Adolf Eichmann. While Plath uses the Nazis for her metaphors of death, Levertov turns to Eichmann's trial to validate man. In the first five lines of her poem "During the Eichmann Trial," Levertov extends her vision of humanity so that it includes the Fascist who epitomized evil during the days of his trial. For most who wrote of Eichmann or who saw him, he was a monster. For Levertov, he was a man:

He had not looked,
pitiful man whom none

pity, whom all
must pity if they look

into their own face²⁴

In order to understand Eichmann and his murder of five million Jews, Levertov defines him in terms that are compatible with her vision of life. She is struggling to identify the individual in Eichmann, the "I" that could destroy obediently and mindlessly. Her poem strangely uses the same images, even the same metaphors, that Plath used in "Daddy," but Levertov's are invested with the questions that lead to understanding, not with Plath's arguments that lead to final solutions.

The poem insists upon the connection between Eichmann and herself and others—the synapse is of pity. We must pity if we look at Eichmann and at ourselves.

Here is a mystery,

a person, an
other, an I?

Is he a man? Did he kill five million? "Count them," she says. Eichmann's answers to the question of his behavior oddly recall Plath's poem:

'I was used from the nursery
to obedience

all my life. . .
Corpselike

obedience,'

Eichmann's justification reminds us of the child-like tone of "Daddy" and then of the mindless, depersonalized action that moves Plath to group murder.

Later in the poem, Levertov refers to blood in almost the same phrase that Plath used to explain poetry: "the blood jet." She says of all those deaths in the German camps,

'A spring of blood
gushed from the earth.'
Miracle

unsung. I see
a spring of blood gush from the earth—

Earth cannot swallow
so much at once

a fountain
rushes towards the sky

unrecognized
a sign—.

The blood of the Jews is a road to heaven—a sign of spiritual life from an anonymous death. And what of Eichmann?

Pity this man who saw it
whose obedience continued—

he, you, I which shall I say?
He stands

isolate in a bulletproof
witness-stand of glass,

a cage, where we may view
ourselves, an apparition

telling us something he
does not know: we are members

one of another.

Eichmann, the Fascist, the man in the glass booth, becomes in Levertov's poem a startling metaphor: he teaches a lesson he has not learned, that we are bound by humanity, that we share our humanity, that we must pity one of our own "whose obedience continued." Eichmann, the monstrous killer of the Jews, the unrepentant, unthinking murderer is yet another mode of experience for Levertov, who wonders about his crime and yet perceives in him what we too possess, humanity. Our function is to pity.

The tone is contemplative. Yet it contains allusions to the worst crime of our era, but the crime is modulated by the thesis that we are part of one another. The thesis is supported by the simple form and direct diction that characterize Levertov's other poems. The basic form of the poem is the couplet, with short lines of two to three feet. The rhythm of the poem is not abrupt or staccato, because Levertov uses run-on lines between the couplet stanzas. She both exploits and ignores the limitations of the stanza by using the run-on lines and by repeating sounds, words, and phrases without accentuating them. For example, "pitiful," "pity," and "pity" occur in the first four lines. "Whom" is repeated twice in the same lines. The continuity from one stanza to another is effected quietly, just as the main thesis of the poem is emphasized by the repetition of few words. The repetition of sounds and phrases creates a unity and flow in the poem that sustain and extend the thesis of the poem. The diction is comparable also to the other poems by Plath and Levertov: 77 per cent of the words are monosyllabic, creating a simplicity and directness that support the simplicity and directness of her thesis.

Where Plath used the Jew-Fascist motif to persuade us to kill, Levertov uses the same motif to teach the brotherhood of man. Where Plath's metaphors enabled her to lose her identity and become a faceless killer in a group, a victim who retaliates, Levertov's metaphors enabled her to reaffirm her identity even through Eichmann, who victimized so many. With Plath, the self is lost; with Levertov, it is affirmed. With one there is only death; with the other, life.

That Levertov and Plath saw the same world in antithetical terms may not surprise us, but when their experiences and the metaphorical expression of those experiences are so close in time and place, we do wonder at the differences. Plath translated her experiences into an argu-

ment for death; she used a compelling, riding structure and a metaphorical design that forced us to agree with the murder of her father and, by extension, to affirm her death. She was not a Jew, and her father was not a Nazi, but those metaphorical identities gave her the facelessness that violence demands. Her anonymity is strengthened by a rhythm that builds to a martial cadence or a ritualistic frenzy, in either case justifying a loss of self and a move to murder and eventually to suicide.

Levertov translates her experiences into an adoration of life; she uses a looser structure that is defined by her in a traditional fashion, i.e., through rhythm, sounds, and pauses that function as vehicles of the theme. She is emblematic, choosing a tulip to verify her idea that we live fully until we die. We want to agree with her lesson, because her metaphors are common and comforting. Unlike Plath, Levertov is a Jew; yet, paradoxically, it is Plath, not Levertov, who is persecuted. Somehow the sense of victimization is part of Plath but not of Levertov. Instead, Levertov finds through Eichmann another explanation of the nature of man by identifying him as an individual, an "I," who is pitiful. His inability to comprehend his crime is pitiful. Levertov does not seek vengeance or even a catharsis from that tragedy. She takes it in, absorbs it into her scheme of life, and affirms through Eichmann the brotherhood of man. Anything that denies her individuality is rejected, whether it is a dress or her Jewishness. She is an "I."

The visions of Plath and Levertov are contrary. One wrote as a Jew and was not; the other was a Jew and wrote as an Everyman. One saw in her life despair, death, destruction; the other hope, life, a lesson. Both conveyed their experiences in concentrated language, in stunning images, compelling metaphors. both used the rhythm and sounds of words to impress us subliminally with their contrary theses.

NOTES

1. Aristotle, *De Poetica*, transl. Ingram Bywater, *Poetics*, chap. 22, 1459^e lines 53-57, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 1479.
2. Annette Lavers, "The World as Icon—On Sylvia Plath's Themes," *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 104-105.
3. Sylvia Plath, "Kindness," *Ariel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 82.
4. Denise Levertov, "The Poet in the World," *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1973), p. 116.

5. Levertov, "The Poet in the World," p. 112.
6. Denise Levertov, "The Artist," *With Eyes at the Back of our Heads* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1959), p. 4.
7. Levertov, "Pleasures," *With Eyes . . .* p. 17.
8. Plath was married to the poet Ted Hughes; Levertov was married to the novelist Mitchell Goodman. Levertov's volume of poetry *The Freeing of the Dust* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1975) affirms her resilience despite the separation from her husband.
9. A.R. Jones, "On Daddy," *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 230-236.
10. Jones, p. 236
11. Jones, p. 236.
12. Jones, p. 236.
13. Jones, p. 231.
14. A.E. Dyson, "On Sylvia Plath," *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), p. 209.
15. Denise Levertov, "Some Notes on Organic Form," *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1973), p. 7.
16. Levertov, "Some Notes . . .," p. 8.
17. Levertov, "Some Notes . . .," p. 13.
18. Denise Levertov, "The Tulips," *The Jacob's Ladder* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1961), p. 53.
19. Denise Levertov, "Line-Breaks, Stanza-Spaces, and the Inner Voice," *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1973), pp. 20-24.
20. Levertov, "Line-Breaks . . .," p. 20.
21. Levertov, "Line-Breaks . . .," p. 21.
22. Levertov, "Line-Breaks . . .," p. 22.
23. Levertov, "Line-Breaks . . .," p. 24.
24. Denise Levertov, "During the Eichmann Trial. i. When We Look Up," *The Jacob's Ladder* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1961), pp. 61-63.