Guide to the Denise Levertov papers from the estate of Mitchell Goodman M1140

Finding aid prepared by Tim Noakes
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Abstract: This collection contains personal and family correspondence, poetry and prose writings, and journals and notebooks from Denise Levertov.
Creator: Levertov, Denise, 1923-1997

Scope and Contents
The Denise Levertov papers from the estate of Mitchell Goodman are divided into 4 separate series. Series 1 constitutes personal correspondence; Series 2, family correspondence; Series 3, Poetry/Prose/Lecture drafts and notes; Series 4, ephemera.

Biographical
Levertov, Denise (24 Oct. 1923 - 20 Dec. 1997), poet, was born in Ilford, Essex, England, to Paul Levertoff and Beatrice Spooner-Jones Levertoff; as an adult she reverted to the traditional spelling of her surname. Her father was a Russian Jew who had converted to Christianity in the late nineteenth century, ultimately becoming an Anglican priest. He traced his ancestry back to the founder of a mystical Hasidic sect that had flourished in Russia in the eighteenth century. Denise Levertov's mother was descended from a well-known Welsh mystic named Angel Jones. Levertov grew up feeling what she later described as "a sense of wonder" at the marvel of creation from the teachings of both of her parents, and although she was not conventionally religious as an adult, her upbringing was undoubtedly the source of a mystical strain underlying much of her poetry.

Levertov, along with her older sister, Olga, was educated at home and never attended school. For "instruction" her mother read aloud to the family daily from works by Dickens, Tolstoy, Conrad, and other great writers. Denise and her sister were encouraged to read widely themselves in the large family library, which included not only classical standards and scholarly books on a number of subjects but also many volumes of poetry. Their father was also a biblical scholar who was fluent in a number of languages, translated several Hebrew classics into English, and wrote a life of St. Paul. As a child Denise studied painting and ballet, and she began to write poetry. At the age of twelve she sent some of her poems to T. S. Eliot, who responded with an encouraging letter of advice, and by her early teens she had decided to become a poet.

Following the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Levertov trained as a nurse at St. Luke's Hospital in London and remained there for the duration of the conflict. Her wartime experiences, including the eight months in 1940-1941 when the city was under continual aerial bombardment from the Nazis, undoubtedly contributed to the strong antiwar stance that she was to take two decades later. Throughout the war years she wrote verse, some of which was published in local journals, and her first book of poetry, The Double Image, appeared in 1946. After the war ended in 1945, Levertov worked in an antiques store and a bookstore, then went to Europe, supporting herself by working at a hospital in Paris and teaching English in the Netherlands and in Geneva, Switzerland. There she met a young American writer, Mitchell Goodman, and the two were married in December 1947. They lived in Paris and Florence for several months then moved to New York in 1948; their son was born the following year, and she was naturalized in 1955.

Levertov had continued to write poetry during the postwar years, and her career was given an unexpected boost after some of her earlier verses were read by the American poet Kenneth Rexroth. Although he felt that both their neoromantic sentiments and their carefully rhymed and formally metered structure were old-fashioned, he believed that Levertov was a promising new writer, and he included some of her work in his anthology New British Poets (1949). Even more significant was her introduction to the poet Robert Creeley, a friend of her husband's who went on to teach at the celebrated Black Mountain College, an experimental school in Asheville, North Carolina. Creeley, along with the so-called Black Mountain Poets—including Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Edward Dorn—with whom he became allied, called for a new "projective," open verse that would supplant traditional "closed" poetry. They believed that most poetry from the recent past was centered in the poet's ego and expressed personal sentiments in arbitrarily constructed lines of constricted language: in a word, it sounded "affected" to contemporary ears. Projective verse, on the other hand, focused on nature and voiced the normal rhythms of human speech and breath. Among modern poets, the projectivists most admired William Carlos Williams, in whose verse could be heard the voices of ordinary people.
Levertov was impressed by Creeley's notions of poetry, and the verse that she now wrote reflected his influence, as well as that of Williams and another American poet, Wallace Stevens. Earlier she had claimed to be most inspired by the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Rainer Maria Rilke, and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle); now Williams and Stevens, and their distinctly American idiom, joined her pantheon. When Creeley moved on to become a member of the faculty at Black Mountain, Levertov began contributing poems to his new journal, the Black Mountain Review. Her second collection of verse, Here and Now (1957), represented a major departure from the style of her first.

Although Here and Now was published by the Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti as part of his Pocket Poets series, Levertov claimed then and afterward that while admiring some of the work of Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and several other Beats, she never considered herself one of their number. She strove, she said, for poems with an "inner harmony in utter contrast to the chaos in which [many of the works of the Beats] exist." Poetry, she later noted, had a social function only to the extent that it should "awaken sleepers" rather than giving them violent shocks. Among the many admirers of her second book was Kenneth Rexroth, who later noted how pleased he was to see her move away from the sentimental "lassitude" of her earlier work.

Levertov published several more volumes in succession during the 1950s: Overland to the Islands (1958); Five Poems (1958); and With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads (1959). In these, as well as in Here and Now, she employed free verse to write about ordinary events in life and nature and the pleasure taken in their observation, leaving behind her early mannered style and announcing the birth of her true voice as a poet. Her next volumes, Jacob's Ladder (1961) and O Taste and See (1964), continued in this vein, conveying a delight in natural images and revealing the mystical strain that would become evident in most of her subsequent verse.

Levertov wrote several essays about her mature art, among them "Statement on Poetics" (1959), in which she made the paradoxical observation that while content determined form, "content is discovered only in form." Poets were seers, she wrote, conscious of the layered meaning of that word, and a poet had a "responsibility to communicate what he sees" so that "they who cannot see may see." Her 1965 essay, "Some Notes on Organic Form," which first appeared in Poetry magazine and has been widely anthologized, hazarded an explanation of how a poem came to be written: the poet, she said, had to have an experience so intense that it had to be "brought to speech."

By the early 1960s other critics besides Rexroth were applauding Levertov's poetry, though there were some dissenters who felt that she was following too consciously in the vein of the Black Mountain poets and lacked originality. Her critical and popular audience became increasingly polarized by the end of the decade as Levertov became an outspoken opponent of the Vietnam War. First drawn into opposition when the war escalated in 1965, she led the formation that year of the Writers' and Artists' Protest against the War in Vietnam. For nearly a decade, until the last American forces were withdrawn in 1973, she was a leader of the antiwar movement, giving speeches and writing articles, some of which were included in her essay collection The Poet in the World (1973). A volume of her poetry, The Sorrow Dance (1967), decried the conflict while also mourning the death of her sister. In addition she visited Hanoi with an American antiwar delegation in 1972, a year that also saw the breakup of her marriage.

Levertov's collection The Freeing of the Dust (1975) included not only antiwar poems but also confessional verse in which she wrote about her present life and loneliness and narrated a spiritual journey that reflected the strong influence of Jungian psychology on her thinking. Levertov expanded on this theme in poems that she wrote during the final two decades of her life, by which time she had secured her status as an important American poet of the twentieth century. She published nearly a dozen volumes of verse during this period, including Candles in Babylon (1982) and the critically acclaimed Breathing the Water (1987), as well as two collections of prose: Light Up the Cave (1981) and New & Selected Essays (1992). Levertov's last book of poetry was Sands of the Well, published in 1996. In the course of her long career she also published translations of Bengali, Bulgarian, and French prose and verse and served as poetry editor of two prominent leftist periodicals, The Nation (1961-1963) and Mother Jones (1975-1978).

Levertov died in Seattle, Washington, of complications from lymphoma.

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Subjects and Indexing Terms
Abbey, Edward, 1927-
Brand, Millen
Carruth, Hayden
Cousins, Norman.
Creeley, Robert, 1926-2005
Goodman, Mitch
Goodman, Nikolai
Goodman, Paul
Gregor, Sandra
Hamady, Walter
Jarrett, Emmett
Kinnell, Galway, 1927-
Kissinger, Henry
Kresch, Al
Leontief, Adelle Wassily
Levertov, Beatrice Adelaide
Levertov, Paul
Loewinsohn, Ron
Mailer, Norman
Martin, John
New Directions.
Paley, Grace.
Rich, Adrienne Cecile
Roethke, Theodore , 1908-1963
Rukeyser, Muriel
Schrieber, Ron
Sorrentino, Gilbert
Sweeney, Jack
Trien, Eve
Wendell Berry
Willard, Nancy
Williams, Flossie
Williams, William Carlos, 1883-1963
Wolpe, Hilda
American poetry
Series 1. Personal Correspondence

Scope and Contents

Personal Correspondence contains primarily correspondence from close friends and notable individuals, mostly written from 1965-1967. Correspondents include William Carlos Williams, Henry Kissinger, Robert Creeley, and others.

Box 1, Folder 1  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, 1956-1979
Box 1, Folder 2  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, 1960-1968
Box 1, Folder 3  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, 1964-1968
Box 1, Folder 4  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, 1965-1967
Box 1, Folder 5  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, 1965-1967
Box 1, Folder 6  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, 1965-1967
Box 1, Folder 7  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, 1965-1967
Box 1, Folder 8  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, 1965-1967
Box 1, Folder 9  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, 1965-1967
Box 1, Folder 10  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, 1965-1967
Box 1, Folder 11  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, 1965-1967
Box 2, Folder 1  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, 1965-1967
Box 2, Folder 2  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, 1965-1967
Box 2, Folder 3  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, 1965-1968
Box 2, Folder 4  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, ca. 1967
Box 2, Folder 5  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, ca. 1967
Box 2, Folder 6  Denise Levertov: incoming personal correspondence, ca. 1967
Box 2, Folder 7  Denise Levertov: outgoing personal correspondence, drafts, notes, etc.
Box 2, Folder 9  Denise Levertov: miscellaneous outgoing postcards, 1980-1986
Box 4, Folder 9  Janie [? ] to Denise Levertov, 1965-1967
Box 4, Folder 12  Edward Abbey to Denise Levertov, 7/4/1966
Box 4, Folder 13  Wendell Berry to Denise Levertov, 1967
Box 4, Folder 14  Millen Brand to Denise Levertov, 1966-1968
Box 4, Folder 15  Hayden Carruth to Denise Levertov and Mitch Goodman, 1965-1986
Box 7, Folder 1  Hayden Carruth to Denise Levertov, 9/16/1968 with Jim Cunningham poems
Box 4, Folder 16  Norman Cousins to Denise Levertov, 1968
Box 4, Folder 17  Robert Creeley to Denise Levertov, 1962-1990
Box 4, Folder 18  Paul Goodman to Denise Levertov, 1967
Box 4, Folder 19  Walter Hamady to Mitch Goodman, 1968
Box 4, Folder 20  Emmett Jarrett to Denise Levertov, 1965-1967
Box 4, Folder 21  Galway Kinnell to Denise Levertov and Mitch Goodman, ca. 1965-1968
Box 4, Folder 22  Henry Kissinger to Denise Levertov, 5/9/1968
Box 4, Folder 23  Al Kresch to Denise Levertov, n.d.
Box 4, Folder 24  Adelle Wassily Leontief to Denise Levertov and Mitch Goodman, n.d.
Box 5, Folder 1  Ron Loewinsohn to Denise Levertov and Mitch Goodman, 1966-1967
Box 5, Folder 2  Ron Loewinsohn to Denise Levertov and Mitch Goodman, 1966-1967
Box 5, Folder 3  John Martin to Denise Levertov, 1967
Box 5, Folder 4  New Directions to Denise Levertov, 1965-1967
Box 5, Folder 5  Grace Paley to Mitch Goodman, 1986
Box 5, Folder 6  Adrienne Rich to Denise Levertov, 1966
Box 5, Folder 7  Ted Roethke to Denise Levertov, 1961
Box 5, Folder 8  Muriel Rukeyser to Mitch Goodman and Denise Levertov, 1987 and undated
Box 5, Folder 9  Ron Schreiber to Denise Levertov, 1967
Box 5, Folder 10  Gil Sorrentino to Denise Levertov, 1965-1966
Box 5, Folder 11  Jack Sweeney to Denise Levertov, 1962-1963
Box 5, Folder 12  Eve Trien to Denise Levertov, ca. 1966-1967
Box 7, Folder 3  Nancy Willard to Denise Levertov (includes "A Wake for the Wild Horses")
Box 5, Folder 13  Flossie Williams to Denise Levertov, 1967
Box 5, Folder 14  William Carlos Williams to Mitch Goodman, 10/22/1958
Box 5, Folder 15  Hilda Wolpe to Denise Levertov, n.d.
Box 4, Folder 11  Correspondence: booksellers and libraries, 1984
Series 2. Family Correspondence

Scope and Contents
This series contains correspondence between Denise Levertov, Mitch Goodman (her ex-husband), and Nikolai Goodman (Denise and Mitch's only son). There are also a few early letters from Denise to her parents, Paul and Beatrice Levertov.

Box 2, Folder 10
Early Denise Levertov letters to parents, ca. 1950-1958

Box 2, Folder 11
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1953-1981

Box 2, Folder 12
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1955-1985

Box 2, Folder 13
Denise Levertov: incoming/outgoing family correspondence, 1956-1986

Box 3, Folder 1
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1956-1985

Box 3, Folder 2
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1964-1992

Box 3, Folder 3
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1965-1987

Box 3, Folder 4
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1965-1989

Box 3, Folder 5
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1968-1986

Box 3, Folder 6
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1974-1986

Box 3, Folder 7
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1974-1991

Box 3, Folder 8
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1974-1996

Box 3, Folder 9
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1975-1981

Box 3, Folder 10
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1975-1984

Box 3, Folder 11
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1976-1983

Box 3, Folder 12
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1976-1984

Box 4, Folder 1
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1976-1985

Box 4, Folder 2
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1977-1999

Box 4, Folder 3
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1979-1980

Box 4, Folder 4
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1981-1983

Box 4, Folder 5

Box 4, Folder 6

Box 4, Folder 7
Denise Levertov: outgoing family correspondence to Mitch and Nikolai Goodman, 1989-1992

Box 4, Folder 8
Denise Levertov's "last letter to Mitch, hand carried by Nikolai from Seattle," [1996]

Box 4, Folder 10
Mitch Goodman: incoming correspondence, 1945-1973

Box 4, Folder 25
Olga Levertoff to Denise Levertov, ca. March 30, 1962

Box 4, Folder 5
Olga Levertoff to Denise Levertov, ca. 1962-1964

Box 4, Folder 26
Denise Levertoff to Olga Levertoff, 6/18/1962

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Series 3. Poetry/Prose/Lecture drafts and notes

Scope and Contents

This series contains drafts of Levertov's poems and prose works. Along with these drafts, this series includes many lecture notes used for her poetry class.

Box 5, Folder 16
Olga poems, AMs (1st draft)

Box 5, Folder 17
Olga poems, TMs

Box 5, Folder 18
Olga poems/Jacob's Ladder: AMs

Box 5, Folder 19
"A Tree Telling of Orpheus," "To go by the Asters and breathe," AM's

Box 5, Folder 20
Poetry: drafts/notes

Box 5, Folder 21
Poetry: drafts

Box 5, Folder 22
Poetry: drafts

Box 5, Folder 23
Poetry: drafts

Box 5, Folder 24
Poetry: drafts (with correspondence to Mitch Goodman)

Box 5, Folder 25
Poetry: drafts (photocopies)

Box 5, Folder 26
Poetry: drafts and notes

Box 5, Folder 27
Miscellaneous notes

Box 5, Folder 28
TMs: "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus"

Box 5, Folder 29
Prose writing: "The Truth and Life of Myth in Poetry"

Box 5, Folder 30
Prose writing: "For Four years of the War I was a nurse..."

Box 5, Folder 31

Box 5, Folder 32
Lectures on poetry: notes

Box 5, Folder 33
Lectures on poetry: notes

Box 5, Folder 34
Lectures on poetry: notes

Box 5, Folder 35
Notes and correspondence re. "Myth in Literature and Religion"

Box 6, Folder 1
Levertov autobiography: "One Summer Evening"

Box 6, Folder 2
Notes on other poets

Box 6, Folder 3
Levertov corrections for unknown Sandy Gregor manuscript

Box 6, Folder 4
Levertov corrections: unknown poets

Box 6, Folder 5
Poems by others

Box 7, Folder 4
"Tajimara," Levertov translation of Juan Garcia Ponce

Series 4. Personal Ephemera

Scope and Contents

Personal ephemera contains Levertov's diary, notebooks, broadsides, annual calendars, miscellaneous articles, contracts, and photographs.

Box 6, Folder 6
Denise Levertov Diary, ca. 1957

Box 6, Folder 7
Levertov notebook, re. Castle poems, ca. 1971

Box 6, Folder 8
Publications/Broadsides: "A Marigold from North Viet Nam," "Conversations in Moscow"

Box 6, Folder 9
"The Truth and Life of Myth in Poetry," by Robert Duncan (photocopy)

Box 6, Folder 10
Robert Duncan: Levertov speech and notes.

Box 6, Folder 11
Miscellaneous artwork (artist unknown)

Box 6, Folder 12
Partisan Review

Box 6, Folder 13
Levertov ephemera: 1956 passport

Box 6, Folder 14
Levertov address book

Box 6, Folder 15
Photographs

Box 6, Folder 16
Miscellaneous articles

Box 6, Folder 17
Miscellaneous articles, broadsides, documents

Box 6, Folder 18
Mademoiselle Magazine, 1958: "Two poems by Denise Levertov"

Box 6, Folder 19
Levertov "Year Book," undated

Box 6, Folder 20
Denise Levertov notebook, ca. 1967

Box 6, Folder 21
Mitch Goodman, financial documents, 1952

Box 7, Folder 2

Box 7, Folder 7
Miscellaneous notes

Box 7, Folder 8
Miscellaneous documents/broadsides
Box 7, Folder 9

New Directions publishing contracts