

The Poet, The Place, and the Stone:
Denise Levertov at Kirkridge

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I stepped out of the car, stiff from the long drive. My eyes swept over the vast fields and mountainous terrain, settling on an old, white, multi-winged farmhouse. My vision, however, was soon drawn to what appeared to be a massive boulder--far off down the road, rising up out of an open, sloping meadow.

Later, from a different perspective, I would find that it was actually a "cromlech"--a mushroom-shaped portal of sorts, constructed of two large upright boulders upon which rested another horizontal slab. Once through this portal, I would descend down a slope; to the right and left of the path, large stone figures--in natural and human shapes--were scattered. Finally, I would come to a round stone chapel, inside of which would be another great stone. I would light a candle there, and think of my father, dead now 14 years. A short walk further--across a small foot-bridge and over a stream--I would find more stone figures, as well as a huge open stone "playhouse," where I could move in and out of the structure, freely.

In this setting, in May of 1989, at the Kirkridge retreat and study center (a Celtic-established community in the mountains of Pennsylvania), Denise Levertov gave a presentation, "Poetic Image as Spiritual Insight." I had been looking forward to this experience for some time, thrilled to be spending a weekend with a poet I had admired and emulated for years; with a poet who was to be included in my book, *The Feminization of Form*; with a human being I had regarded with absolute awe, yes, as one might perceive one of those great boulders surrounding the farmhouse.

At our first meeting, she handed out copies of scores of poems--by Rumi, Rilke, Hopkins, Keats, Wendell Berry, Lucille Clifton, Thomas Traherne, W.S. Merwin--more. Many more. Often, she would read a poem, make a comment, and then sit quietly, her hands folded neatly in her lap. Commenting once more, she would bring her aging hands to her throat, as if to gently massage her neck. Or to prompt the flow of language? I was reminded of her old poem, "Cancion:"

When I am a woman--O when I am
a woman
my wells of salt brim and brim
poems force the lock of my throat

Once, she asked each of the 20 workshop participants to read the same long poem aloud, one after the other, merely for the sake of hearing it read and re-read. We would walk away, she said, with this poem buried deep in our subconscious, though we may never recall what it was, or even that it existed.

Of course, there were discussions; and although I found them stimulating and provocative, I was ultimately disappointed, frustrated, nearly enraged. For it seemed that the content, the methodology, and the direction of the workshops were so controlled that I had to fight for psychic and intellectual space to sift, sort, and integrate my responses. It was if one of those great boulders from down in the meadow had been pulled right into the farmhouse conference room. Denise was hard and tough, intercepting any comment that was not in line with some seemingly particular direction in which she wanted to move--though I honestly could not discern what that direction was. She was unreceptive--perhaps intolerant--to comments and perspectives of literary, critical, or feminist import. My identity as a woman, a poet, a scholar, a professional--dissolved to dust. Shattered most, though, was the image I had so long carried of Denise as Mythical-Mother-Poet-Guide. Priestess?

Still, with what then seemed a combination of audacity and hope, I mentioned to Denise, over supper, that I was working on a poem about entering a rock. But I was stuck, unable to find my way out.

"You might like that big stone structure, just past the footbridge," she responded. "It's full of open

spaces.”

“Yes, I’ve been there,” I replied.

I went back late that night.

In the final analysis, I have grown, as we all do from such intensity of experience. I carried home with me a great deal of pain, energy, and inspiration, along with some small, precious, unarticulated insight. I remembered an old passage from Denise’s “Growth of a Poet:”

Blind to what he does not yet need
He feels his way over broken glass
to the one stone that fits his palm.

When he opens his eyes he gives to what he gazes at
the recognition no look ever before granted it.
It becomes a word. Shuddering, it takes wing.

One powerful image remaining is, indeed, that of the shattered glass of disillusion; and yes, I had to blindly feel my way over the fragments of romantic projection and Bloomian anxiety until some pebble, some gleaming, solid, image of Self emerged. This is probably what Denise would have wanted. I also recall learning that a small footbridge would carry me across a narrow stream: to a great open stone playhouse, where I can, whenever I wish, move in and out of the structure--freely.

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