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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Selected Poems by Denise Levertov and Paul A. Lacey

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finished college." Since the answers range from the Bible through certain Shakespeare plays to short stories and novels, the result is more "an attempt at defining the canon" than defining a book. Kirby admits this, then doesn't go any further.

*What Is a Book?* contains more than just these four essays. The section on "What Is a Writer?" also includes an essay about handbooks of poetics; an omnibus review of books by Richard Howard, Charles Wright, and a pair of anthologies; a brief survey of eleven collections by Southern poets, and an elegiac tribute to James Dickey. "What Is a Critic?" and "What Is a Book?" also contain assorted pieces, many of which are reprinted encyclopedia discussions of critical figures, movements and books. This pattern—bulking out the book's core essays with loosely connected, previously published material—gives *What Is a Book?* a slapdash, repetitive feel. It also scatters the already diffuse central arguments.

"There is only one reason to teach and write about reading," Kirby says, "and that's because you love books." His essays intend to get at the heart of Why and How we write or read. But there's a danger in this, as there is danger in trying to analyze and define why we love a particular woman or man, or what we love in a Bach fugue. Some things just don't lend themselves to analysis and definition. As a result, Kirby often finds himself stymied at exactly the point when he is attempting to be clearest. "In great books," he says, attempting to explain what a reader is, "there are always many elements that defy explanation." Looking at criticism and at writing itself, he keeps coming up against "the thing you can't explain." *What Is a Book?* ends up being unable to answer most of the questions it asks. But it remains a provocative and entertaining pastiche in which Kirby offers many keen, resonant observations.

—Floyd Skloot

***Selected Poems by Denise Levertov, edited and with an afterword by Paul A. Lacey, New Directions, 2002, \$24.95 cloth, ISBN 0811215202.***

Denise Levertov's *Selected Poems* endeavors to do what all "selecteds" do: give readers a chance to see for themselves the development of a poetic sensibility. Editor Paul A. Lacey has brought together poems from nearly every collection of Levertov's oeuvre, producing a catalogue of the wildly diverse subjects that engaged her throughout her long career. Here are poems about love and war, about religion and art, about sorrow and joy, about political resistance and familial intimacy and, perhaps most significantly for Levertov's legacy, numerous poems about the practice of poetry itself.

The book weaves its way through Levertov's life much as her poetry did. Because of her tendency to write autobiographically, it is quite literally, the imagination of a life. In "Everything that Acts Is Actual" Levertov concludes:

We are faithful  
only to the imagination. *What the  
imagination  
seizes*  
*as beauty must be truth.* What holds you  
to what you see of me is  
that grasp alone.

Levertov was raised in England by her father, a Russian Hasidic Jew-turned-Anglican priest, and her mother, a Welsh Congregationalist, who educated both Denise and her sister Olga at home. As a twelve year old, she sent some of her poems to an acquaintance of her father's—T. S. Eliot—who replied, Lacey tells us in his afterword, with "encouragement and criticism as to an adult." At the end of World War II she met and married the American writer Mitchell Goodman in Paris, and moved to the United States. In an early poem, Levertov sketches the contours of this romance:

I want to speak to you.  
To whom else should I speak?  
It is you who make  
a world to speak of.

The directness of these lines is typical of Levertov's work. The accessible, unadorned, grounded language which marked her verse in its beginnings remained a hallmark of her writing for six decades. It is perhaps for this reason that she forged a close relationship with William Carlos Williams, whose work introduced her to an American idiom that was initially foreign to her. Like Williams, Levertov shows a modernist's preference for the simple, the concrete, and the imagistic in an effort to get beyond simplicity itself. "Organic form" was the label she gave to this approach, which has close corollaries in the poetry of her predecessors. In the poem "September 1961" she pays tribute to some of these: "This is the year the old ones, / the old great ones / leave us alone on the road." The "old ones" are that motley group of poetic pioneers united under the banner of modernism: H. D., Ezra Pound, Williams, and, especially, Eliot, whose ghosts loom large in Levertov's work. "We hear / our footsteps each time a truck / has dazzled past us and gone / leaving us new silence."

Where Levertov broke from her predecessors most completely was in her forthright engagement of a progressive politics in the 1960s. Beginning with the 1967 collection, *The Sorrow Dance*, Levertov was galvanized by both the Vietnam War and personal tragedy. A righteous anger permeates her writing about the war, and the poet who had wondered so plaintively about love now confronts a world of violence. In "Life at War," she considers how a human being

still turns without surprise, with mere regret  
to the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk  
runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies,  
transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp fragments,  
implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gulleys.

Ungenerous readers are quick to call the war poems "strident." Yet Levertov's poetry, even at its most politically-minded, attempts to cultivate an inner voice of reflection: "nothing we do has the quickness, the sureness / the deep intelligence that living in peace would have." The marriage of philosophy and politics becomes more central in her last poems, which explore a late-in-life conversion to Roman Catholicism. If her religious poetry has a central characteristic, though, it is its suspicion of itself. Levertov begins her poem "Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis" with a wry caveat: "Maybe He looked indeed / much as Rembrandt envisioned Him . . ."

One of the most moving poems in the collection is "Poet and Person" (first published in *Candles in Babylon*, 1982), a rumination on what might be called the Poet's Progress:

When I arrive, you love me,  
for I sing those messages you've  
learned by heart, and bring,  
as housegifts, new ones. You hear  
yourselves in them,  
self after self. Your solitudes  
utter their runes, your own  
voices begin to rise in your throats.

The ecstasy of poetic creation offers a glimpse of salvation, but it's a momentary one. Levertov's haunting acknowledgements come quickly: "But soon you love me less" is followed by "I take up / so much space" and finally "When I leave, I leave / alone, as I came."

This *ars poetica* serves to demonstrate a crucial feature of Levertov's career: though she may have sided with self-described political revolutionaries

during her life, her artistic sensibility was far from radical. Instead of concentrating on pushing the boundaries of acceptable form, she worked with her readers, as if bound to them by ethical commitment. Levertov's *Selected Poems* inevitably runs aground against this limitation, and her conventionality can be tiresome. But it can also be brilliant, particularly when the poet defends her art and its role in contemporary society.

—V. Joshua Adams

***No Shelter: The Selected Poems of Pura López-Colomé, translated by Forrest Gander, Graywolf Press, 2002, \$15.00 paper, ISBN 1555973604.***

In a 1969 interview, Kenneth Rexroth spoke of his “absolute obsession [to] return . . . American poetry to the mainstream of international literature.” Nearly thirty-five years later, Rexroth’s hope, though scarcely closer to realization, has lost nothing of its urgency. The self-insulated provincialism of much of the current North American poetry scene marches in lockstep with the wider society’s devolution into Fortress America, defensively, even defiantly ignorant of what lies beyond its assiduously-policed borders. And as the United States publishing world becomes a subset of a few transnational conglomerates, small presses and (to a lesser degree) university presses, those traditional havens for international writing and experimental work, are imperiled by reduced grant monies and increasing operational costs.

In these unpropitious circumstances, the appearance of a volume of selected poems by the Mexican poet Pura López-Colomé, with English translations by Forrest Gander, is a welcome event, not least because it grants North American readers a sustained glimpse of an individual body of work, beyond the small samplings generally made available in anthologies of national poetries. The author of five previous books of poetry (three of which are represented in this collection), López-Colomé is very much a citizen of that realm of international literature mentioned by Rexroth. She has read her work in several North American and European venues, translated such writers as Virginia Woolf, Seamus Heaney, Georg Trakl, and Paul Celan, and published reviews and criticism in various Mexican newspapers.

While López-Colomé cannot be said to employ “genre-breaking forms,” as the hyperbolic jacket copy proclaims, she is clearly a master of the poetic sequence. This is particularly evident in the ten-part poem “Aurora” (“Dawn”), which speaks with a controlled ecstasy and lyrical precision reminiscent of H. D., another poet she has translated. Each section of the poem moves through a metamorphic process of illumination whose