

## Preface

American poetry in the postwar years was a time of creative contention. The formalist poetics of the New Criticism—exemplified by John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks, and by younger poets like Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and Richard Wilbur—was challenged by several different kinds of experimentation with what was called open and inventive form, as opposed to closed, or conventional form. The sections of Donald Allen's canonizing anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960) mapped out the experimenters in groups: the Black Mountain poets (including Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Duncan, and Levertov), the San Francisco poets (including William Everson, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Robin Blaser, and Jack Spicer), the Beats (including Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gregory Corso), and the New York poets (including Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and John Ashbery). There was some overlap and interaction between the groups, but the mapping was useful because the groupings represented different places, different literary lineages, and significantly different intentions in open form poetry and poetics.

Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov are linked, in anthologies and literary histories, with the experimental poets of the Black Mountain school. During the early and mid-1950s the Black Mountain poets coalesced in the pages of *Origin*, edited by Cid Corman, and in the *Black Mountain Review*, edited by Robert Creeley. The group's clearest rallying call and statement of purpose had come in Olson's 1950 essay "Projective Verse," with its notion of "composition by field." The collective name of the group derived from the Black Mountain College in rural North Carolina, where Olson was rector during its last years and where a number of the poets were students or faculty, but also, and much more accurately, the designation came from the constellation of the poets in the *Black Mountain Review*. "The Black Mountain poets" was a literary not a geographical

designation. The poets visited one another now and then, but not often, and it was not until the Vancouver Poetry Conference in the summer of 1963 that Olson, Duncan, Creeley, and Levertov were in the same place at the same time. The letter was the medium of communication. The criss-cross of letters and poems knit the group together and created a sense of a shared venture. Their deep concern with the creative process and specifically with articulating just how the poem took form as a linguistic field from the many-leveled field of experience generated a remarkable epistolary record—notably between Olson and Creeley, published in nine volumes (which is not the complete correspondence) by Black Sparrow Press, and between Duncan and Levertov, published in a single large volume by Stanford University Press.

The friendship between Duncan and Levertov was particularly close. Duncan had been bowled over by her poem “The Shifting” in *Origin* in 1953 and then initiated the correspondence, but she had known and admired his early book *Heavenly City Earthly City* even before she emigrated to the United States in 1948. The poets met for the first time in New York in February 1955 when Duncan and Duncan’s partner the painter Jess Collins were on their way to Mallorca, where they met Creeley for the first time. The Duncan-Levertov correspondence runs to almost five hundred letters. They wrote back and forth about their domestic lives as well as literary and artistic events, but above all their ongoing discussions explored the ways of the poem—its possible forms, its visionary character—and the binding responsibility of being a poet. For many years this exchange of letters, so frequent that they read almost like an epistolary novel, sustained the poems they wrote, often to and for each other. They led separate domestic lives on opposite coasts—Duncan in the San Francisco area and Levertov in New York and Maine—and consequently met in person infrequently. Nonetheless, their correspondence comprises a personal and poetic dialogue so urgent and intense that it reads like love letters whose bonded commitment was to the power of language and to the imagination’s unflagging search for expressive form. As Levertov said to Duncan at the end of a poem-letter of April 1966,

Love I send, but I send it  
in another word.

Longing?  
Poetry.

In the course of the 1960s, however, the Vietnam War entered and transformed their world. To their consternation they found themselves by the end of the decade in increasingly sharp and sharply expressed disagreement about how poetry can and should cope with the violence and evil of the war, and more fundamentally about the agency of poetry in the political and social world. The rupture that came in the early 1970s was personally devastating, but their divergent views about the moral and aesthetic responsibilities of the imagination remain instructive and challenging because those vexed issues not only defined their poetic epoch but continue to be just as crucial—and as vexed—today. There is no richer or more revealing exchange between two major artists in modern American letters.

To mark the publication of *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, we, as coeditors of the volume, organized a symposium at Stanford University on November 7 and 8, 2003. Three poets with various allegiances with Levertov and Duncan—Robert Creeley, Eavan Boland, and Michael Davidson—opened and closed the symposium. Creeley—through his close ties with Duncan and Levertov and through his magnanimous and generous spirit—became a radiant center for all the proceedings. Moreover, as we listened to the papers by a wide range of critics, we recognized that the intersections and juxtapositions, the convergences and contrasts of insight and perspective gave the occasion at once an extraordinary openness and a pervasive coherence. This was the kind of “company” of poets and readers Creeley talked about so often.

Except for the essays by Robert J. Bertholf, Albert Gelpi, and Aaron Shurin, all the other essays presented here are revised and expanded versions of the papers delivered at the Stanford symposium. In one way or another, all the essays develop out of themes and ideas in the correspondence between Duncan and Levertov. The table of contents organizes the essays into three interrelated sections. The first section deals with several formative issues in the poets’ growth and relationship. Robert J. Bertholf explores the anarchist principles behind Duncan’s thinking about politics and his antiwar sentiments, all of which shaped his response to Levertov’s active participation in antiwar protest. Graça Capinha’s essay, which follows Bertholf’s, gives serious consideration to the issue of how the teaching of Ernst Kantorowicz, who was one of Duncan’s professors at the University of California, Berkeley, helped define Duncan’s ideas about the laws of

politics and the laws of poetry. In the next chapter, Devin Johnston discusses the poems in Duncan's book *Letters*; when Duncan read Levertov's poem "The Shifting" in *Origin*, he wrote the first poem of that book, "For A Muse Meant," which he sent to her, initiating their long correspondence. Levertov and Duncan lived in a world of poetry as well as in the world of the arts, and Donna Krolik Hollenberg centers her discussion on the artist John Button, known by both Duncan and Levertov. Levertov wrote a long poem about Button, and the discussion of that poem reveals much about her aesthetics and her ideas about poetic form.

The second section presents and reflects on Duncan and Levertov through more personal accounts. Ellen Tallman, who, with her husband Warren Tallman, organized the Vancouver Poetry Conference in the summer of 1963, tells informative and amusing stories about Duncan. From the point of view of having known both Duncan and Levertov as mentors, Aaron Shurin sets out the poets' responses to political views by reading their political poems against specific historical events of the 1960s and 1970s. Both Duncan and Levertov read in the spiritualist sources of Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah and, as John Felstiner demonstrates in his chapter, each made different uses of the materials.

The third section examines various aspects of the split that ended the poets' close and intense association. The discussions of poetry and politics in the Duncan/Levertov letters was not the only such discussion, as Brett Millier demonstrates in her essay on the eighth issue of the magazine *Chelsea*, edited by David Ignatow, the theme of which was the relationship between politics, war, and poetry. Millier raises some of the same issues about political and war poetry—mainly how difficult it is to write such poetry—as Charles Simic raised in his recent review of the Duncan-Levertov correspondence (*New York Review of Books*, November 4, 2004). Anne Dewey, in her chapter, develops related themes as she defines the conflict between personal and public authority in building a foundation for a political stance in a poem. Peter O'Leary then shifts the attention to the poems in Duncan's volume *Tribunals*, as he raises more issues about the poet's control over his own texts in preparation for a reading of the prophetic themes in the poem "Before the Judgment, Passages 35." Jose Rodriguez Herrera finds in his analysis of the theme of "Revolution or Death" that part of the difference of views of Duncan and Levertov about

political subjects derived from a different apprehension of the functions of language in the poetics of the two poets. Paul A. Lacey might agree with some of Herrera's conclusions, because in his exploration of Duncan's and Levertov's use of Southwell's poem "The Burning Babe," he finds that the poets come to different conclusions though they derive their poems from the same Southwell poem. And in the collection's final essay, Albert Gelpi lays out the argument that even though both poets shared the view of life and poetry as sacred events, their different stances toward visionary experiences produced a poetry that characterizes the conflict between Postmodernism (Duncan) and Neoromanticism (Levertov). The variety in the essays finally projects the variety, intensity, and complexity of the whole of the Levertov/Duncan correspondence.

We wanted to dedicate the volume to Robert and Denise, and we had hoped that Bob Creeley might write an afterword for it. But, saddened now by his absence, we dedicate it to the memory of Robert, Denise, and Bob, old friends and wonderful poets whom we were fortunate enough to know and count as friends. They would have eagerly engaged the authors of these essays in further and even heated discussion of the issues out of common concern—but each with differently inflected gusto, emphasis, and conviction.

*Albert Gelpi and Robert J. Bertholf*  
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