

## Remembering Denise Levertov 1923-1997

50 years ago, on December 10, 1967, the poet Denise Levertov visited Merton at Gethsemani. As he recorded in his journal: 'Denise Levertov was here with Wendell Berry and Tanya and the Meatyards. ... I like Denise very much. A good warm person.' As an anti-war activist, she had first written to Merton a few months earlier asking him to submit a poem for the War Resister's League. Merton had, in fact, first noticed Levertov's poetry as early as 1961. In a letter to Ernesto Cardenal dated October 14, 1961, he had written: 'There is a very fine new poet, Denise Levertov. ... She is splendid, one of the most promising. ... You will like her very much.'

Denise Levertov was born and grew up in Ilford, Essex. Her mother was Welsh, and her father was an exiled Hassidic Jew who converted to Christianity and became an Anglican priest. She felt the call to be a writer from an early age. Marrying the American writer Mitchell Goldman in 1947, the couple moved to America the following year. Developing as a distinctly American poet and writer during the 1950s, during the 1960s and 1970s she became much more politically active in her life and work, the latter part of her life being spent in education. In 1984 she converted to Christianity and in 1990 she was received into the Catholic Church. She died 20 years ago, on December 20, 1997.

Politics, war and religion are major themes in the 24 published volumes of her poetry. The poem opposite, 'On a Theme by Thomas Merton' is from *Evening Train*, published in 1992. This volume contains some of her best mature work, full of highly religious poems, in which she comes to accept all the paradoxes inherent in a life of faith and to be reconciled to the fact that many questions may not have an answer.

In August 1993 David Scott wrote to Levertov asking her for a poem for the Winchester Merton Conference. She replied, sending him a copy of her fine poem, 'Conversion of Brother Lawrence', which is included in her posthumous collection, *Sands of the Well* (1998). She wrote:

I had a wonderful afternoon with Merton, sitting in his hermitage (& drinking Bourbon!). Wendell and Tanya Berry and the late Gene Meatyard and his wife took me to Gethsemane, & they'd all met him before so they went off for a walk about in the wood and gave me the chance for a tête à tête. I wish I'd written down what was said. Alas, I didn't.

I am grateful to Mark Meade for suggesting this article and providing me with the quotations, and to New Directions Publishing Corp for permission to reproduce Levertov's poem. *Stephen Dunhill—Editor*