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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words ““there comes a time when only anger is love.”” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

CRAFT VERSUS CONSCIENCE

The rift of war between poets Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov.

By Ange Mlinko

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One day in early September 1966, the poet Robert Duncan, then 47, was walking to a streetcar stop in San Francisco when lines of verse began drifting to him out of nowhere. These poems would appear toward the end of what may be Duncan’s finest book, *Bending the Bow* (1968), which was written largely in response to the Vietnam War. He laid out their impetus in a letter to one of his dearest friends, Denise Levertov, who provided the surge of inspiration: he was in a “rapture” walking to the streetcar, because he had been listening to a tape of Levertov reading her poem sequence “Olga Poems.” (It would be published in 1971 in *To Stay Alive*, her anti-Vietnam book, a counterpart to Duncan’s.)

Denise Levertov was one of the most important people in Robert Duncan’s life. They had been carrying on a correspondence since 1953, and their letters at times resembled those of lovers. Within a few years this friendship would shatter. The story unfolds in *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, and is analyzed in the essays of *Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Politics, the Politics of Poetry*, both edited by Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi. Ostensibly, the friendship foundered on their divergent ideas of what a political poem was. What seemed to be a passionate, but private, intellectual argument escalated to public betrayal.

The two friends took pleasure in their rare meetings—they were often scheming to fund each other’s visits through readings, carefully tallying up the fees and honoraria. Disagreements and critiques were cushioned by assurances of love: Levertov: “. . . because to me you are one of the great, as well as below’d, I have never & will never speak ‘critically’ of you to anyone but yourself.” Duncan is even more demonstrative, as

in this letter of 1961: “That’s what I did want to write most . . . the ever-lasting delight of these times in my life when I am actually with you.”

By the mid-1960s, questions of craft—not to mention conscience—became subsumed in the debate over the Vietnam War. Duncan was working on the poems that would comprise *Bending the Bow*, Levertov on the poems that would first appear in *Relearning the Alphabet* and then be reprinted in *To Stay Alive* with an author’s preface tying their genesis to the war and her opposition to it. Both struggled aesthetically with the turn from lyric to public address. However similar their struggle to write a new political poetry, it became clear early on that they differed radically in their approaches. The conflict was twofold: Duncan did not approve of Levertov’s activism—he considered group action coercive and demagogic, at one point saying she was “conscripted” into activism, thus equating it with the draft—and both of them variously disapproved of each other’s poetic methods.

His letter of March 30, 1968, criticized Levertov’s appearance in the Rankin Brigade Washington protest, broadcast on TV:

Do we believe in unilateral peace? Then surely it is we who must create it where we are. But the revolution, like Nixon, believes in inflicting peace on their own terms. I do not ask for a program of Peace; but I do protest the war waged under the banner of Peace, no matter who wages it.

In so many words, Duncan was warning Levertov that her protests were so engaged with the war that they were partaking of war themselves. Finally, utterly shaken, they agreed to put their differences aside for a year and a day. But only a couple of months later, Duncan struggled to make amends: “I have begun to see . . . my contention with you as contention with my own anima.” Levertov tried to explain herself too:

. . . what has actually happened is only that I no longer have the emotional dependency on you, on your approval, I had for so long and which was not really a good thing.

Neither poet seems to have understood to what extent they had absorbed the war outside and, like combat veterans, brought it into the household, dooming it. In 1974, an interview with Robert Duncan appeared in *Out of the Vietnam Vortex: A Study of Poets and Poetry Against the War*:

[Levertov]’ll be writing about the war and suddenly . . . you see a charged, bloody, sexual image that’s haunting the whole thing, and the war then acts as a magnet, and the poem is not a protest though she thinks she’s protesting.

This public airing of their unresolved private conflict was the last straw. Levertov held back for a year, but finally wrote Duncan that their friendship was “twice broken, deeply betrayed.” Six months passed before Duncan wrote her back, never mentioning the

interview. In 1978, at last, he wrote to praise her book *Life in the Forest*. Levertov would have none of it.

To those grappling with the consequences of “free verse” and “organic verse,” the position of the poet vis-a-vis politics went to the heart of craft as they were re-visioning it. Duncan and Levertov (and many of their cohorts) did not view their task as mastering a verse form or even perfecting the stand-alone poem: it was about crafting a life work, with the relationship between poems, and between poet and world, replacing form as an end in itself.

There is no bolder declaration of language as ethics—or as the very ground of ethics, without which principled stances would not be possible. Duncan and Levertov could not have written such beautiful poems, or made such electrifying correspondents, had they not been thinkers who engaged the deepest questions about war, violence, and creation. For, as Levertov wrote, “there comes a time when only anger is love.”

Ange Mlinko’s poems and articles have appeared in the *Village Voice*, *The Nation* and *Poetry*. Her latest book of poems is *Starred Wire*. This article first appeared on www.poetryfoundation.org. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation. Read more about Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov, and their poetry, at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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