

‘A FORMING POEM’: TOWARDS A PROCESS POETICS

Lacey Jones*

Abstract

Even as theopoetics turns to literary structures and grammatology to arbitrate between an Absolute and Absolute meaninglessness, John Caputo and David Miller are careful to separate its project from theopoetry’s representations of God. But this division makes little provision for figures like Denise Levertov, whose work suggests that the religious question is an inherently aesthetic one, that this arbitration can happen through representation. This article reads Levertov’s ‘The Tide’ in order to define a mode of signification unbound to spiritual fixity. Through its characterisation of both form and faith as process, ‘The Tide’ offers a new way of negotiating the relationship between literature and theology.

Keywords: Denise Levertov, Form, Process, Theopoetics, Faith

I. INTRODUCTION

When Catherine Keller describes the intersection of theopoetics and process philosophy, she presents a vision of creation that finds an unexpected parallel in Denise Levertov’s Organic Form, a mode of poetics which sees form as ‘peculiar’ to an experience, emerging from content rather than applied as a preordained scaffolding.¹ Theologian and poet alike observe in both poetics and process a mode of spiritual thought that neither reinscribes fixed notions of Presence nor assumes an act of *ex nihilo* creation. In the poem ‘Making Peace’, for example, Levertov offers an imagining of political resolution that can only be known in the act of its composition:

But peace, like a poem,
is not there ahead of itself,

*Yale University, New Haven, CT 06511. Email: lacey.jones@yale.edu

can't be imagined before it is made,
 can't be known except
 in the words of its making[.]²

These lines might be read as a sort of *ars poetica*, articulating an organic poetry in which revelation happens only as we construct its emergence. For Keller, too, the contingency of construction occurs in conjunction with the possibility of presence. Whereas David Miller situates, as she observes, a stark divide between the fixed, Absolute *theos* of theology and the made-up *theos* of radical theo-poetics, Keller finds a 'creative alternative' in process thought.³ Her processual model shares with theo-poetics an understanding that *theos* is constructed, but she maintains, unlike radical theology, that to 'recogniz[e] the constructedness—the poetics—of *theos* does not mean that therefore humans construct that God ex-nihilo'.⁴ Instead, her process theo-poetics figures creation as a mode of perpetual relation: 'the beginningless and endless process of our interactivity'.⁵ As in Keller's schema, Levertov's Organic Form prioritises the process of relation. Like peace, poetry unfolds through the 'dynamic interaction' between form and content.⁶

Through its formal attention to a processual mode of creation, Levertov's poetics offers a distinctly aesthetic echo of Keller's overlap between theo-poetics and process theology, two responses to the 1960s crisis of meaning that confronted literary and theological spheres alike. Theo-poetics answered via paradox: a spiritual formalism that hinges on dual movements of construction and deconstruction.⁷ Process thought proposed a system that by its very constitution must remain open.⁸ Recent attempts by thinkers like Keller and Roland Faber to articulate different modes of theologically productive relationship between the two movements have located their overlap in a multifariousness simultaneously committed to radical difference and the unity implied by becoming.⁹ Levertov's poetry formally negotiates both this difference and unity by embodying their interplay. In her conception, form is no longer a premade template to be deployed for content's disclosure. Instead, the poet's alternative formulation—'form is never more than the *revelation* of content'—implies their coemergence.¹⁰

Organic Form breaks from invocations of traditional poetic structures. Levertov attributes to each of her poems a unique 'inscape', its own particular embodiment of some 'form beyond forms'.¹¹ This model intimates the security of an animating inherence simply awaiting concretion. Crucially, however, form's revelation entails an act of construction, and construction admits contingency. If Levertov sees the poem as 'a method of apperception', a site of recognition for our intuition of the 'form in all things', it is a form that can only be realised through the making of the poem.¹² Organic Form thus offers a mode of signification unbound to preexistent apperceptions of either origin or telos. Levertov's poetics is more interested in form's emergence, the very process of

its developing relationship with content. Her work locates form's revelation somewhere between creation and the redundancy of representation: hers, she suggests, is a poetics of realisation.¹³ Form and content unfold through each other in a becoming that seems at once a fashioning and an emergence.

At stake in the distinction is the location of novelty itself. Poetry as emergent relegates novelty to the site of perception. The poem exists as a dawning realisation of some latent thing. In contrast, poetry as fashioned locates novelty as the poem itself, equating meaning with context rather than assuming some outside foundation. This distinction can also be read as one between poetry as representation and poetry as contingency. 'Making Peace', however, like Keller, denies this division:

A feeling towards [peace],
dimly sensing a rhythm, is all we have
until we begin to utter its metaphors,
learning them as we speak.¹⁴

What we can know only through its making, as Keller might suggest, reveals the inseparability of creation and discovery. The revelation of peace unfolds as an aesthetic process, emerging through the creative act itself. Organic Form moves in much the same way. In Levertov's work, a poem's unifying form becomes through the particularity of its content, and this form in turn renders its relationship to this content visible.

Her poetics, in fact, might be read as a literary version of Alfred Whitehead's own 'principle of process': '*how* an actual entity *becomes* constitutes *what* that actual entity *is*', such that 'its "being is constituted by its becoming"'.¹⁵ In Levertov's organic poetry, this duality results in a strange reflexivity, where form functions as both the aesthetic embodiment and enaction of process.¹⁶ In other words, form makes visible the relationship between the particularities it takes up *and* its own role in constructing this relationship. If for Whitehead the 'formal constitution' of an actual entity or occasion is to be 'considered as a process of realizing an individual unity of experience', the "'formal" aspect' of an entity means that 'the process involved is immanent in it'.¹⁷ To consider a being in terms of its formal aspect means to recognise it as the residue of the movement of process, where process means the determining and ordering of relations amongst particulars. As Faber observes, 'becoming is always a matter of emphasis. Relationality is always selective'.¹⁸ For Levertov, as for Whitehead and Keller, the animating source of process can only be known through these relations. So too do we know peace through the language that articulates it. Form-as-process becomes its own product—not because it signals *telos* but because it reveals novelty as relation itself.

Levertov's poetry was not exceptional in its process poetics—her Black Mountain ties bind her to writers like Charles Olson, whose projective verse finds philosophical parallels in Whitehead's thought.¹⁹ Indeed, Levertov locates herself amidst a 'twentieth-century impulse to move away from prescribed forms' that stemmed from 'an awakened interest in the experience of journeying and not only in the destination'.²⁰ 'We are as interested,' she writes, 'in process and digression as in an ultimate goal . . . we have, as it were, an interest in seeing the brushstrokes'.²¹ But Levertov's literary engagement with questions of process was distinct in its theological investments. Far from the product of a divine bestowal, faith throughout her work is contingent on effort and practice.²² Through process, her aesthetic and theological concerns converge: to know God and to realise form are equally bound to the process of making. The poet locates the relationship between poetry and faith not just in their analogy but in their interaction, where writing itself is the process that animates spiritual encounter. 'Thus for me,' she writes, 'the subject is really reversed: not "faith that works" but "work that enfaiths"'.²³

The clearest incarnation of this interplay comes in 'The Tide', a poem in which faith itself is at stake and where poetic form is the object of its own radical interrogation. 'The Tide' is less an aesthetic site that belies its theological commitments than it is a formal exploration of how Levertov's aesthetic and spiritual investments create each other. This convergence presents a literary mode of doing theopoetics, one at apparent odds with the distinction between theopoetry and theopoetics posited by figures like Miller and John Caputo, who are careful to separate the project of artistically representing a fixed, eternal God from that of writing to sustain the fundamental hermeneutic uncertainty following the Death of God.²⁴ Levertov's poetry pushes for a reconsideration of these categories, as it neither reinscribes representation nor obliterates its very possibility.

Instead, Organic Form emerges as a new mode of signifying in the absence of spiritual certainty: one characterised by its prioritisation of process. In this sense, Levertov's process poetics functions as a case study for questioning the role of aesthetic creation in the kind of arbitration between meaning and its absence that theopoetics takes on. 'The Tide', for example, is a literary presentation of a process theopoetic in which, as Keller writes, 'what becomes possible, let alone knowable' is 'what comes into relation'.²⁵ Or, in Levertov's words, form 'is discoverable only in the work, not before it', revealed through the particularity of its relationship to content.²⁶ What 'The Tide' makes possible is a new vision of the relationship between the literary and theological: neither the decorative representation of some existent deity, nor the *ex nihilo* fashioning of a new *theos*, poetry facilitates divine encounter for writer and reader alike through its construction.

II. 'THEOPOETRY OR THEOPOETICS?'

Miller's 'Theopoetry or Theopoetics?' retraces Levertov's intimated distinction between poetics of representation and construction on more overtly theological grounds. Defining theopoetry as that 'artful, . . . creative . . . and rhetorically compelling manner of speaking and thinking concerning a theological knowledge that is and always has been in our possession', Miller positions it against theopoetics, those 'strategies of human signification in the absence of fixed and ultimate meanings accessible to knowledge or faith'.²⁷ His anxiety about the redundancy of theopoetry—'just another way of expressing theology's eternal truth'—is shared by John Caputo, who is careful to establish that by theopoetics he does not mean 'any form of poetic ornament or adornment of some preestablished belief'.²⁸ Instead, both envision a mode of writing that articulates and enforces the instability of signification after the Death of God. Both see theopoetics as a literary holding open, an active denial of the fixed meaning that an unchanging transcendental would enable. In theopoetics, 'God' and meaning are always at stake, always pure construction and so always being undone. Whatever is built demands its own deconstruction. Theopoetics' denial of God as both the origin and *telos* of meaning seems to render it impossibly hostile to presence.²⁹ Signification is denied both a referent and the closure of a sign. If theopoetry decorates, theopoetics deconstructs.³⁰

It comes as no surprise that Miller and Caputo both exalt Keats' Negative Capability, a radical receptivity in which the artist holds herself perpetually open to revelation. Both thinkers refuse the closure of certainty—Miller resists the idea of author as determining, and Caputo advocates for a position of hospitality towards the unknown.³¹ But if Negative Capability resonates with the constant act of clearing that theopoetics undertakes, Levertov's own embrace of the term pays equal attention to its connection with artistic production. She is quick to underscore that for the poet this opening of self must be in 'delicate equilibrium' with 'creative energy': 'I cannot,' she says, speaking of both her faith and her poetry, 'simply enter a ready-made structure; I have to find components and construct my own.'³² Openness to arrival coincides with a dedication to making.³³ Apperception of 'the immanence of form in content' coincides with a poem's construction.³⁴

While Levertov's belief in a form beyond all forms and her presumption of the inherence of a form in all experiences disqualify her poetry from the label of deconstructive theopoetics, her attention to the mutuality of openness and construction reveals an almost Whiteheadian impulse at the heart of Caputo's and Miller's imaginaries. When Miller frames enjambment as the poetic device which captures the 'criterion of theopoetics' that demands 'it generat[e] a next line . . . that may be unpredictable and containing surprise', he highlights the

processual impulse underlying theopoetic revelation.³⁵ The value of enjambment, he continues, is that 'it keeps things going on, presenting surprise and unpredictability *in the turn* to the next line'.³⁶ Miller locates novelty in the turn itself, as the relationship between lines that facilitates the arrival of what follows. Similarly, if theopoetic revelation appears to Caputo as 'an event', a singular happening, it is an event of relations: 'another worlding of the world' that interrupts the 'spacing and timing of the given world with a new form of spacing and timing, a new and unforeseen way to be'.³⁷ Neither the breaking in of some deity nor the arrival of some ultimate consummation, revelation appears in the act of relation. Novelty comes less as a being than as the relationality of this 'way to be'. Caputo's suggestion that a poetics provides a grammar for 'what is going on *in* what happens' underscores this emphasis.³⁸ The new is not the produced but the production, and form, for Caputo at least, is the way of relating that this production entails.

Deconstruction here opens onto process, reframing revelation as the act of becoming, rather than what becomes. Reconsidered as the privileging of relation over relation's terms, revelation appears in Caputo and Miller as simultaneously adverbial and formal—at once embodied and embodying. Levertov seems to position poetic form as the site and means of this simultaneity. Like Caputo, who sees the task of poetics as 'provid[ing] insistence with a discursive existence', she finds poetry to be the 'crystallization' of 'correspondence between those elements' of a poet's experience into words.³⁹ What poetry reveals, she says, is 'that unity, that trembling web of being': 'the interdependence of all things'.⁴⁰ Organic Form not only reveals these relationships—it participates in the very act of their creation. Levertov's poetics, in fact, appears as an indirect precursor to the description of theopoetic poetry articulated in 'The Theopoetics of Literature: An Aesthetic Statement': poems in which there is both 'a process of embodiment and a process of becoming'.⁴¹ That both nouns—embodiment and becoming—are subordinated to modifiers of process draws attention to Levertov's form as a new mode of spiritual writing. Neither the reinscription of theopoetry nor the pure contingency of deconstructive theopoetics, Levertov's Organic Form both participates in and represents processual revelation.

III. 'THE TIDE'

The intersection of Levertov's ideas of Organic Form with the movement inherent to process thought emerges with particular clarity in her post-conversion poem 'The Tide', which suggests a faith animated by its perpetual construction. Insofar as 'The Tide' interrogates its own role in this construction, Levertov's piece is as much an aesthetic questioning as it is a spiritual one. The narrator begins:

Where is the Giver to whom my gratitude
rose? In this emptiness
there seems no Presence.

•

How confidently the desires
of God are spoken of!
Perhaps God wants
something quite different.
Or nothing, nothing at all.⁴²

The poem opens with a God who is absent, relegated to a past perception. And yet, phrased as a question, its first lines intimate the chance of an answer, locating presence in a liminal state: neither arriving nor impossible. This lack of fixity, the shifting ground between faith and its undoing, oscillates between reframing absence as a space of openness and underscoring the impossibility that presence might ever arrive. The repetition of ‘nothing’ threatens to undermine the suspended hope to be found in that there only ‘*seems* no Presence’. It appears as the clearing out of not only God’s expectations but also the very possibility of a wanting God.

From within this stance of radical, intentional uncertainty—recalling her attention to Negative Capability—Levertov begins to construct images of faith in the stanzas that follow.

Blue smoke from small
peaceable hearths ascending
without resistance in luminous
evening air.
Or eager mornings—waking
as if to a song’s call.
Easily I can conjure
a myriad images
of faith.
Remote. They pass
as I turn a page.

•

Outlying houses, and the train’s rhythm
slows, there’s a signal box.
People are taking their luggage
down from the racks.
Then you wake and discover
you have not left
to begin the journey.⁴³

The poem’s metaphors are never obvious—faith appears as smoke, as a train ride, as a morning song, and all these are positioned within the poem’s titular conceit. But

precisely because of their apparent disjointedness, Levertov's metaphors enact processual creation. As Stanley Hopper observes, in its disjuncture between points of comparison, diaphor eschews mere representation and instead catalyses 'new qualities and new meanings': faith as susceptible, constructed.⁴⁴ That this inscription of difference fuels process is made clear through the visual echo of these diaphors of faith, what Levertov elsewhere refers to as 'a kind of nonaural rhyme'.⁴⁵

Images from each section are picked up in a variated form in those that follow, rendering visible the unfolding of Organic Form. The smoke that ascends, for example, climbs upward like the gratitude that once rose. Both ultimately dissolve into illusion—the prayer becomes an empty one, the smoke quickly 'pass[es]'. So too do mornings wake only 'as if' to a song's call, where what is conjured again disappears. This illusory presence continues into the poem's fourth stanza, where 'rhythm' and 'signal' echo the morning song, and waking this time means discovering one's own stagnancy. The metaphors of this flow of prehensions each vanish in succession. None are fixed into the representation of faith. But in their passage, faith emerges—not as the first term in a metaphorical relationship but rather as the relation itself, as the very process of encounter. Rather than the estranged reverberating of some pure concept, this sort of echo makes visible the creative nature of relation. Whatever traces of each other Levertov's metaphors carry in their difference point to relationship as the source of faith's novelty.

As the poem's final stanza reveals, the narrator's 'myriad images' fail only when one expects them to fix faith into a permanent presence. Her constructions do not endure, but they continue, and this movement is essential. Extending the poem's processual unfolding—rhythm becomes that of the tide, a forming poem recalls the turning of pages before it—Levertov here relies on a productive ambiguity to articulate a faith realisable only as process:

Faith's a tide, it seems, ebbs and flows responsive
to action and inaction.
Remain in stasis, blown sand
stings your face, anemones
shrivel in rock pools no wave renews.
Clean the littered beach, clear
the lines of a forming poem,
the waters flood inward.⁴⁶

'Remain in stasis' and be the prisoner of material stagnancy, the bitterness of 'blown sand' against your face, the slow suffocation of life. A spiritual aridity. Action is the resurrection; faith swells when it returns to flux. Rather than remain stagnant, the narrator must act perpetually, must 'clean the littered beach, clear/the lines of a forming poem'. Here the poet calls her own medium into question. The role of aesthetic form in faith's arriving is at stake in her diction: poetry as the mediator of presence or a reifying barrier.

‘Clear/the lines of a forming poem,’ writes Levertov, but it is not clear whether ‘clear’ appears as verb or adjective, if the lines of a forming poem must be swept away to allow the tide to flow again or if the poem’s construction is its own form of spiritual action. The lines either cannot congeal enough to speak of God, or they inhibit faith’s movement entirely. ‘Forming’, wrought with its own polysemy, suggests at once poetry that animates faith and poetry as a restrictive bounding, a constriction that inhibits movement.

Poetry thus renders itself precarious in this final stanza. The suggestion that a poem might somehow be inhibitory calls Levertov’s project into question and reframes the conflict between presence and absence, already once repositioned as a question of action and inaction, as a question of poetic form as midwife or impediment. Insofar as the poem here engages with questions of its own efficacy, of whether or not the unfolding of Organic Form is an enacting or a cluttering, the poem’s final lines might be read as another *ars poetica*, the articulation of Levertov’s aesthetic project as the process of both embodiment and becoming:

Dull stones again fulfill
their glowing destinies, and emptiness
is a cup, and holds
the ocean.⁴⁷

Emptiness appears as a form held open to the flooding inward of the tide, absence forming the vessel that holds faith’s ocean. Reanimated into those living stones of 1 Peter 2:5, lifeless rocks are brought forth into purpose again in their encounter with the tide’s swell. Their fulfilment signals the movement of absence itself into form, such that emptiness is not supplanted upon the cup’s filling. Here a certain solidity of form emerges—the metaphor equating faith to a cup is phrased without any qualifiers. But the image’s impossibility whispers of movement: the tide of faith must necessarily overflow its bounded container; the ocean will spill from its cup. This tension finds its prosodic expression in the enjambment of ‘holds’, which, in denying the verb its immediate connection to an object, both underscores its motion and suggests an emptiness that retains itself even as it is filled.⁴⁸ Into absence goes and from absence emerges presence, a paradoxical overflow. Form enacts a holding of a tide that will ebb again when it is grasped too tightly to move, reified into beach litter. Faith becomes through and of this movement, through its perpetual creation of absence, that kenotic cup. Levertov’s poem echoes this becoming. Its projective verse finds content and form through each other, allowing faith’s tide to move. The flux of faith becomes in the flux of poetry.

IV. PROCESS POETICS

Levertov’s poetics makes formally visible the act of becoming precisely because it participates in this process. Put another way, the scepticism of ‘The

Tide' towards its own endeavour renders process both immanent and transcendent. When Whitehead observes that the 'formal consideration of one actual entity requires reference to the objective intervention of other actual entities', he points precisely to this kind of nesting effect.⁴⁹ An actual entity that has realised itself—determined the relationship of the parts that constitute it—then becomes part of the becoming of another actual entity, returning immediately to the flux of process. Here a moment of unity must be simultaneously a moment of multiplicity. Or, as Whitehead writes, 'the creative action is the universe always becoming one in a particular unity of self-experience, and thereby adding to the multiplicity which is the universe as many'.⁵⁰ Process is accretive, and 'The Tide' renders this accretion visible, displaying both the objective and formal moments of becoming through its poetic form.

'The Tide' draws attention to this strange duality by moving between intensely specific images and meta-discursive mentions of their production. 'Easily,' the poem's narrator reminds us between metaphors, 'I can conjure/a myriad images.' The conjuring is crucial, both an echo of the construction that enables Organic Form and a way of stressing the importance of particularity to process while retaining the primacy of becoming. Another enjambment that allows a verb to hover between its transitive and intransitive states, 'conjure' at once prioritises its own movement while stressing the connection of this movement to the particular.⁵¹ The images 'pass'; they are 'remote' and bound to their own loss. But they are also crucial. The particular, like Organic Form, is both the trace of and the fuel for process, and Levertov's poetry preserves the particular as it reveals this unifying, productive force. Form becomes, to borrow Bruno Latour's own language of process, the answer to the question of 'how do we know [what is there]' instead of simply 'what is there'.⁵² As the movement of creativity, form is also the re-presentation of its own action. Or, as Faber observes 'the conceptuality of multiplicity and theoplicity must *retrace* its own past, but at the same time ever *create* anew the freshness of imagination that maps its creative reality itself'.⁵³ Form writes as it is written.

Highlighted by the overlapping images between stanzas, each building on what came before and looking towards what will follow, Levertov's Organic Form becomes most visible as such at the poem's end, where the tide that has shaped the piece—both formally and thematically—finally appears. But at the moment in the poem where form might realise its completeness, Levertov wrenches it back open instead, both via the stanza's self-referencing and its apparent inversion of the presence-precluding emptiness invoked by the opening sections. Lest the naming of a tide appear as a kind of thematic telos, Levertov's final stanza articulates this metaphor seemingly in order to contest the spiritual function of poetry itself. Here we get presence and

emptiness that are mutually constitutive: emptiness as a cup denied the function of enclosure through the kinetic energy of overflow. There can be no *telos* of meaning, just as there can be no final arrival of faith—both must become through construction. ‘The Tide’, in other words, offers its own embodiment of form-as-process as a particularity that gets taken up into the construction of faith. The poem interrogates its own task, questioning whether its construction makes faith present or if it stagnates the flow of process. A kind of signification that calls signification itself into question, the final stanza’s reflexivity holds the poem open to its own action.

Read this way, the conclusion of ‘The Tide’ is chiasmic, a productive mirroring that reminds us of the poem’s process by repositioning the poem in the flow of process. Form here serves as a participatory mapping: the enaction of process is also its residue. If form is the revelation of content, it is simultaneously the product of content and the shaping of content: both content’s bringing to light of itself through concretising relationship and the determining of this content through an unfolding form that alters the reality of that which constitutes it. Poetry as medium is crucial to ‘The Tide’ precisely because it makes visible form as process, while itself implicated in the process of faith’s becoming. Though Rogers is correct in observing that ‘the ideas of process . . . are embodied in her poems . . . expressed as much in the poem’s structure as they are in the . . . content,’ he misses the importance of medium to both her craft and her faith when he suggests that ‘Levertov is attempting to write beyond poetry’.⁵⁴ Rather than attempting ‘to transcend the limitations of [its] medium and capture a rumour of the eternal in the crude net [of] earthbound meanings’, ‘The Tide’ relies heavily on the representative functions of its own form as a way of enacting faith.⁵⁵

The question of form in Levertov’s work asks the question of presence in both literary and theological ways. It draws attention, in fact, to the pervasive inextricability of these categories. Whether or not the grounds for faith exist beyond the text, they are knowable only through the uniquely literary process of Organic Form. Levertov’s poetics pays formal attention to multiplicity, the relationship between presence and absence, and becoming. The movement between terms of a diaphor, signification that refers to its own process, the near-equation of presence and absence: all mark a process poetics that renders formally visible the act of becoming precisely because it participates in creation. ‘The Tide’ formally negotiates a mode of signification that does not close around meaning, instead foregrounding creativity itself as an aesthetic and theopoetic juncture.

V. CONCLUSION

‘The Tide’, as Colombo, Harrity, and Serpas might remind us, is not ‘a devotional poem’.⁵⁶ Instead, in its concern with ‘the interactions between the

imagination and being, between the Creator and Created', and in its desire to ask 'simultaneous questions of both', Levertov's is a theopoetic poem.⁵⁷ It interrogates its own concretisation and concretises this very interrogation; it participates in the process of faith that it doubts; it is intensely invested in keeping the particular in view during the movement towards unity. If process theology fights the stasis of fixity via an open system, and theopoetics battles it by wrenching open signification, the process theopoetics of 'The Tide' offers a signification made possible because it is always becoming, a mode of representation that holds absence open to presence. Both representative—of the process it partakes in—and creative—of this same process—Organic Form in 'The Tide' offers a relationship between poetry and philosophies of the sacred that is, like its form and content, mutually constructive. Levertov locates faith in the relationships of textual medium, through the creation of form's emergence. Poetry as mediator concretises the role of form in the process of signification—and encounters, through the processual movement of this form, the possibility of presence.

Organic Form, in other words, renders visible what Keller refers to as 'open becoming in immanent relation'.⁵⁸ In this sense, Levertov might be read as the indirect offering of organic poetry as an answer to Whitehead's 'true philosophic question': 'How can concrete fact exhibit entities abstract from itself and yet participated in by its own nature?'⁵⁹ Poetic form appears as the sediment of the process it enacts—the poem represents faith as it creates it. Whitehead himself looks towards literature's unique position. In distinguishing its function from that of logic, he observes that while both modes partake in the act of abstraction, literature hews more closely to the concrete.⁶⁰ Not only this, he continues elsewhere, but 'the art of literature . . . is to adjust the language so that it embodies what it indicates'.⁶¹ Theopoetic poetry, for example, asks questions of signification through the very medium of signification. 'The Tide' achieves this adjustment by paying self-reflexive attention to form.

Literature's embodiment offers, process thinkers seem to agree, an almost haptic mode of clarity. 'I hope this interlude with Whitman,' Keller writes of her own foray into literary analysis during *Cloud of the Impossible*, 'offers a cloudburst of poetic relief from the density of theory.'⁶² She suggests that his poetry 'will lend sense and affect' to concepts she has traced throughout the book.⁶³ In Levertov's poetry, Rogers writes, Henri Bergson's 'ideas are more solidly rendered'.⁶⁴ Whitehead himself turns to lyric in his intensely theoretical *Process and Reality*, first in order to capture the 'general form' of integral experience 'divested of irrelevant details' and full of the 'ultimate feeling' found in religion, and later to articulate a knotty chiasmic interplay.⁶⁵ But this divestment, as we have seen, does not mean the abstraction away from the particular. Instead, literature offers a mode of thinking about God—

or ‘God’—that lessens the movement of thought away from the concrete and finds in poetry a way of speaking about its own function. It gives to theo-poetics a way of thinking that is both creation and creative, resisting what Keller refers to as ‘the very binary of substantial existence and eventive insistence’.⁶⁶ What process theo-poetics does well, the case study of Levertov reveals, is to make the particular immanent in the abstract. In constructing the emergence of an inscape, Organic Form posits a mode of signification that prioritises processual relationship as a way of moving between the particular and universal in full view of both.⁶⁷ And this mode of signification, ‘The Tide’ demonstrates, might allow us to feel, to see, and to create relationship.

If Levertov’s poetry intervenes in the theo-poetry/theo-poetics divide, it does so as the literary condensation of the role of literature in *doing* theology. Read as a participant in process theo-poetics, ‘The Tide’ issues a summons for the reuptake of dialogue between literary studies and theology—or, more precisely, theo-poetics—in a postmodern context. Here, a literary studies that has forsaken God, if not enchantment, might find a space for new ways of considering signification. Through its characterisation of both form and faith as process, Levertov’s writing signals that process theo-poetics’ solution to the problem of presence can be an aesthetic act as well.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Marta Figlerowicz, whose invaluable support made this article possible, and to the 20/21 working group at Yale, Emily Cox, and Ben Glaser for their generous feedback. Thanks also to the Ertegun Graduate Scholarship Programme, which supported my work during the preliminary phases of this project, and to Michael Oliver for his oversight at that stage. A version of this article was presented as a paper at the 2019 American Literature Association annual meeting.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Denise Levertov, ‘A Further Definition’, *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 14.
- ² Denise Levertov, ‘Making Peace’, in Paul A. Lacey and Anne Dewey (eds and annot.), *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2013), p. 757. ‘Making Peace’ by Denise Levertov, from *Breathing the Water*, copyright ©1987 by Denise Levertov. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.
- ³ Catherine Keller, ‘Theopoiesis and the Pluriverse: Notes on a Process’, in Roland Faber and Jeremy Fackenthal (eds), *Theopoetic Folds: Philosophizing Multifariousness* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), pp. 185–7.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- ⁵ Catherine Keller, ‘The Becoming of Theo-poetics: A Brief, Incongruent History’, *Intercarnations: Exercises in Theological Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), p. 115.

- ⁶ Denise Levertov, 'Some Notes on Organic Form', *New & Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 69.
- ⁷ Theopoetics is marked by a 'desire to focus on aesthetics ... on form ... just as much, if not more than, content', in order to ask 'how is god made?'. Callid Keefe-Perry, 'Theopoetics—An Interview with Callid Keefe-Perry', interview by Wipf and Stock Publishers (*YouTube*, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHuHn3vxePg>.
- ⁸ Whitehead's process system predated this crisis by decades but was proffered anew as an alternative to the Death of God in 1964. See John Cobb Jr, 'From Crisis Theology to the Post-Modern World', *The Centennial Review* 8.2 (1964) 174–88.
- ⁹ To point to this similarity between Keller's and Faber's projects is not to gloss over the nuances of each. For a preliminary look at these nuances, see Keller, 'Theopoesis', p. 181 and pp. 189–91. See also Roland Faber, 'Poetic Transgression: What Happened to Process Theology?' and 'Polypoetics: Mapping, Tracing, and Symbolizing Theoplicity', *The Divine Manifold* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), pp. 37–66 and 165–90. For an overview of Keller's and Faber's work as it pertains to theopoetics, see L. Callid Keefe-Perry, 'Poets and Streams: Roland Faber and Catherine Keller', *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), pp. 70–90.
- ¹⁰ Levertov, 'Some Notes', *New and Selected Essays*, p. 73.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 67–8.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ 'Back of the idea of organic form,' Levertov writes, 'is the concept that there is a form in all things ... which the poet can discover and reveal.' *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- ¹⁴ Levertov, 'Making Peace', *Collected Poems*, p. 757. 'Making Peace' by Denise Levertov, from *Breathing the Water*, copyright ©1987 by Denise Levertov. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.
- ¹⁵ Alfred Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, in David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (eds), corrected edn (New York: The Free Press, 1978), p. 23.
- ¹⁶ I am indebted to Bobby Caudle Rogers, who has articulated a relationship between process thought and Levertov's formal and religious concerns. See Bobby Caudle Rogers, 'Denise Levertov's Poetics of Process', in Darren J.N. Middleton (ed.), *God, Literature, and Process Thought* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 207–25. His 'Denise Levertov's Poetics of Process' was amongst the catalysts for this piece, and I am grateful for his sharp attention to particularity and the 'realizing rather than realized'. Rogers, 'Denise Levertov's Poetics of Process', p. 219.
- ¹⁷ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, pp. 129 and 220. Articulating the relationship between form and process in *Process and Reality* is difficult because of Whitehead's frequent use of both 'form', which he often uses to refer to eternal objects, and 'formal', which he often uses to describe the process of moving from indetermination to determination. The two are related—an actual entity's process is the determination of the relationships between eternal objects and their past actualisations in entities—but not equivalent. This relationship is further complicated by apparent inconsistencies in the use of 'formal' in relation to entities and occasions. See pp. 29, 45, 129, and 219. For more, see David Rambo, 'Interstitial Life, and the Banality of Novelty in Whitehead's *Process and Reality*', *Process Studies* 47.1–2 (2018) 26–46. See also Joseph Bracken, SJ, 'Actual Entity and Actual Occasion: Are These Terms Interchangeable or Quite Different?', *Process Studies* 46.2 (2017) 270–84. Here I will use 'form as process' to refer to literary form as the unique dual embodiment of the Whiteheadian objective and formal existences of an

- actual entity—or, in Levertov, of a poem itself.
- ¹⁸ Faber, *Divine Manifest*, p. 44.
- ¹⁹ But if Olson found form, borrowing Robert Creeley's words, to be the 'extension of content', Levertov's Organic Form turns on its emphasis of 'revelation'. For Olson's explication of his schema, see Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse' (*Poetry Foundation*, 2009), <https://www.poetry-foundation.org/articles/69406/projective-verse>. For an examination of the relationship between Olson and Whitehead, see Shahar Bram, *Charles Olson and Alfred North Whitehead: An Essay on Poetry*, trans. Batty Stein (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004). For more on process poetics that resonates with themes discussed here, see David D. Fineman, 'Olson, Peirce, Whitehead, and American Process Poetics', in Joshua Hoeyck (ed.), *Staying Open: Charles Olson's Sources and Influences* (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2018), pp. 183–202. See also Joshua Hoeyck, *Poetic Cosmologies: Black Mountain Poetry and Process Philosophy* (PhD Dissertation: Washington University, 2008).
- ²⁰ Denise Levertov, 'Technique and Tune-up', *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 95.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- ²² See, for example, Levertov's 'Annunciation' and 'Flickering Mind' in Levertov, *Collected Poems*, pp. 836–8 and 825–6.
- ²³ Denise Levertov, 'Work that Enfaiths', *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 255.
- ²⁴ Miller is interested in a 'formal thinking about the nature of the making of meaning' that transpires after the 'sever[ence] from any dependencies on transcendental referents'. Miller, 'Theopoetry or Theopoetics?', *Crosscurrents* 60.1 (2010) 8. Similarly, Caputo refers to a theopoetics as an 'undertaking trying to avoid the traps and trappings of metaphysics'—'if *logos* is the tranquilizing agent, the poetics is the radicalizing agent'. John Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 15, 66.
- ²⁵ Catherine Keller, *Cloud of The Impossible* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 3.
- ²⁶ Levertov, 'Some Notes', *New and Selected Essays*, p. 69.
- ²⁷ David Miller, 'Theopoetry or Theopoetics?', *Crosscurrents*, p. 8. The deconstructive branch taken up here is just one strand of theopoetics. For an overview of others and their intersections with process thought, see Keller, 'Theopoiesis and the Pluriverse', *Theopoetic Folds*, pp. 179–94.
- ²⁸ Miller, 'Theopoetry or Theopoetics?', *Crosscurrents*, p. 8; Caputo, *Insistence of God*, p. 94.
- ²⁹ See Jeffrey S. Hocking, 'Risking Idolatry? Theopoetics and the Promise of Embodiment', *Theopoetics* 1.2 (2015) 17–42.
- ³⁰ To note, Miller argues that Caputo does not take up the death of God, like Altizer, as absolute, suggesting instead that Caputo finds it as the positive site for reconceptualisations of 'God', a move that Caputo himself attributes to his own distaste for Altizer's radical theology. Crucial to the argument sketched out here, however, is their mutual agreement that 'a theopoetics evokes events that are without author, events that do not mean but be, that are chaotic and open-ended'. Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, p. 273. See also Miller, 'Theopoetry or Theopoetics?', *Crosscurrents*, pp. 7–8.
- ³¹ Miller, 'Theopoetry or Theopoetics?', *Crosscurrents*, pp. 11–12; Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, pp. 8, 40, 78.
- ³² Denise Levertov, 'A Poet's View', *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 245.
- ³³ Levertov cites Martin Buber on precisely this point: 'to produce is to draw forth, to invent is to find, to shape is to

- discover'. Levertov, 'A Poet's View', *New and Selected Essays*, p. 245.
- ³⁴ Denise Levertov, 'A Further Definition', *The Poet in the World*, p. 14.
- ³⁵ Miller, 'Theopoetry or Theopoetics?', *Cross Currents*, p. 18.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17. Emphasis my own.
- ³⁷ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, p. 93.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- ³⁹ Levertov, 'Some Notes', *New and Selected Essays*, p. 69.
- ⁴⁰ Denise Levertov, 'Poetry, Prophecy, Survival', *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), pp. 152–3.
- ⁴¹ Dave Harrity, Martha Serpas, and Claire Miller Colombo, 'The Theopoetics of Literature: An Aesthetic Statement', *Theopoetics* 1.1 (2014) 8.
- ⁴² Denise Levertov, 'The Tide', *Collected Poems*, pp. 910–11. 'The Tide' by Denise Levertov, from *Evening Train*, copyright ©1992 by Denise Levertov. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.* 'The Tide' by Denise Levertov, from *Evening Train*, copyright ©1992 by Denise Levertov. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.
- ⁴⁴ Philip Wheelwright as quoted in Stanley Hopper, *The Way of Transfiguration: Religious Imagination as Theopoesis* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 288. Diaphor is opposed to traditional considerations of metaphor as epiphor, that which expresses the 'likeness of like things' and reinscribes the falsity of existent fixedness.
- ⁴⁵ Levertov, 'Some Notes', *New and Selected Essays*, p. 70.
- ⁴⁶ Levertov, 'The Tide', pp. 910–11. 'The Tide' by Denise Levertov, from *Evening Train*, copyright ©1992 by Denise Levertov. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 'The Tide' by Denise Levertov, from *Evening Train*, copyright ©1992 by Denise Levertov. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.
- ⁴⁸ Thanks to Ben Glaser for pointing out the dynamism of this enjambment and the strangeness of emptiness as form.
- ⁴⁹ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 220.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- ⁵¹ Thanks to Ben Glaser for the attention to the liminal space between these two states that the line break facilitates.
- ⁵² Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004) 244.
- ⁵³ Faber, *Divine Manifold*, p. 31.
- ⁵⁴ Rogers, 'Denise Levertov's Poetics of Process', *God, Literature, and Process Thought*, pp. 215–16 and p. 219.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- ⁵⁶ Harrity, Serpas, and Colombo, 'The Theopoetics of Literature', *Theopoetics*, p. 7.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ⁵⁸ Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, p. 32.
- ⁵⁹ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 20.
- ⁶⁰ Alfred Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), pp. 60–1.
- ⁶¹ Whitehead, 'Mathematics and the Good', *Essays in Science and Philosophy* (London: Rider and Company, 1948), p. 82.
- ⁶² Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, p. 197.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁴ Rogers, 'Denise Levertov's Poetics of Process', *God, Literature, and Process Thought*, p. 208.
- ⁶⁵ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, pp. 208–9 and p. 340.
- ⁶⁶ Keller, 'The Becoming of Theopoetics', *Intercarnations*, p. 113.
- ⁶⁷ For more on Whitehead's own reflections on totality and the particular in both logic and aesthetics, please see Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, pp. 6–62.