

Poetry in the *Anglican Theological Review*

It was the politically charged summer of 1968 when poetry appeared for the first time in the *Anglican Theological Review*. Or rather, the work of one poet, Denise Levertov, one of the most distinguished poetic voices of mid-twentieth century America.

Like Robert Lowell and other poets of her generation, Levertov was as well known at the time for her anti-war activism as for her own religiously inflected body of work. The appearance of this sheaf of her early poems, accompanied by her densely written and deeply personal assessment of their mythic and religious implications, brought a new kind of voice to the journal. Describing one of her early poems (“Overland to the Islands”), Levertov writes that “I was evidently trying to unify for myself my sense of the pilgrim way with my new, American, objectivist-influenced pragmatic and sensuous longing for the Here-and-Now” (*ATR* 50 [1968], 238). Hers was an incarnational imagination, closely tied to a commitment to political change deeply rooted in her Jewish and Christian heritage. It is no accident that she was the daughter of an Anglican priest who converted from Judaism, and was a translator of the *Zohar*, the kabbalist Book of Splendor.

Academic theology had long kept its distance from imaginative writing, and in its first five decades the *ATR* was no exception. Levertov’s appearance in the journal in 1968 signaled a budding *rapprochement* between theologians and imaginative writers, one that reflected a larger movement within the theological world to correct its longstanding indifference—even hostility—to literature and the arts, and to engage with the Here-and-Now both as it was and as it could be imagined to become.

It took another four years before the *ATR* made the publication of poetry a regular feature of the journal. In 1972, Robert Cooper, then a professor of religion and ethics at Nashotah House, accepted the new position of poetry editor. W. Taylor Stevenson, in an editorial note, explained that the introduction of poetry into the *Review* “arises out of the conviction that the recovery of tradition which we seek will come not only, or even primarily, from those in the various theological and historical disciplines, but also from those in a wide variety of other fields, including pre-eminently those who are poets” (*ATR* 54 [1972], 343).

This was a pioneering decision. Forty-four years later, at a time when the rigid boundaries separating academic disciplines have at last begun creatively to blur, the poetry section of the *ATR* remains a feature unique in the world of theological journals, and one its greatest strengths.

— Roger Ferlo,
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President, Bexley Seabury Federation