

1975

Growth of a Poet

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portant to me, as a reader of poetry in a time when it is à la mode to talk of oneself in poems. This book was almost more sculptured than written. It isn't just that it's autobiographically true, for that is an easy kind of authenticity. It is precisely that each confrontation is so struggled for; precisely that the goal itself is so preposterous by normal standards; precisely that the character is no hero but by his own admission an insensitive fraternity boy whose father was an efficiency expert in a slaughterhouse; precisely that he is trying to cast off those parts of himself which in white protestant America would win praise; yes, that one finally has to see this book as a life, a complete organic whole.

Coils is a difficult book to read because there is no superficial way of reading it, just as there is no honest way of *altering* oneself superficially. Even surface changes come from below: that is the message. And the reader himself begins to feel his own transformation as he gets involved with *Coils*, for it does not take more than twenty pages to assure you that you must surrender to the book in order to read it. But it is a seduction rather than an assault. *Coils* is really a long poem, not a collection of poetry. Reading it, I feel that I have witnessed the birth of a major poet.

POEM / DENISE LEVERTOV

Growth of a Poet

I

He picks up crystal buttons from the ocean floor.
Gills of the mind pulse in unfathomed water.

In the infinite dictionary he discovers
gold grains of sand. Each line has its twin
on some shore the other side of the world.

Blind to what he does not yet need,
he feels his way over broken glass
to the one stone that fits his palm.

When he opens his eyes he gives to what he gazes at
the recognition no look ever before granted it.
It becomes a word. Shuddering, it takes wing.

II

*"What is to give light
must endure burning"*
—*Wildgans, quoted by Frankl*

Blind until dreaming grey
sparks green, his eyes
set fire to an ashen street,
a dancer's
bitter flesh in daybreak,
the moon's
last noontime look
over its shoulder.
They fade; the flames
go on burning,
enduring.

iii

Deaf till he hears
what answers:

Grandfatherly
bell, tolling
and telling
of faithful Time, that flood
(ever-rolling), of faithful blood.
The answers pushing
boundaries over,

(those proud embankments),
the asking revealed.

The asking, stones
bared of earth,
hammers at the door, a pulse
in the temple:
the insistent dance
of Who and How and Where,
the arms-akimbo of When.

iv

One at a time
books, when their hour is come
step out of the shelves.
Heavily step (once more, dusty, fingermarked,
but pristine!)
to give birth:

each poem's passion
ends in an Easter,
a new life.

The books of the dead
shake their leaves,
word-seeds fly and
lodge in the black earth.

v

Coffeecups fall out of his hands,
doorknobs slip his grasp and
doors slam,
antique writing-desks break under his

leaning elbows—Taurus
is bucking and thudding, head down across
the cramped field.

But scraps of wood
found on the street, one night when winds were
scraping the thick dark to a steely shine,
become in the poet's hands
a table,
round and
set firm on its one leg.

vi

To make poems is to find
an old chair in the gutter
and bring it home
into the upstairs cave;
a stray horse from the pound,
a stray boat on the weedy shore,
phosphorescent.

Then in the broken rocking chair
take off—to reality!

Realm of ambrosia and hard crusts,
earnest trudging doesn't lead to.

Only when feet begin
to dance, when the chair
creaks and gallops,
do the gates open and we
discover ourselves—
inside
the kingless kingdom!

vii

The wild moonbull
who is the poet
grazes alone
a field of infinite, dewdrenched,
drops of red clover,
sharp spears of grass
which are words.

Over the barbed fence a troop
of boys and young men
who are the poet
throngs, breathless, silent,
to the encounter.

They desire
to practice the dance.
Secretly to prepare.

He breathes
his green, fresh, breath at them,

still distant,
gazing innocent
through fullmoon silver
towards them

and viciously
rushes them, they step
each aside,
old coats for capes,
they taunt him,
he tosses
his deadly flourish of horns,
they love him, they imagine
the hot sunlight of the sacred kill.

Implacable silver
fades. By moonset

they vanish, he hears
the wire fence
twang where they climbed it.

viii

Shadowdog
blocking the threshold.
Only a shadow. But
bites!

 Try
to get out, try
to get in:
 the obstacle
sinks its
teeth in
flesh, and

blood flows,
they are not
shadowteeth,
are sharp, and
dirty.

The venom rises
from torn foot to

heart. Makes
a knot in the heart.
A screeching:
of brakes on the street,
of an unsuspected
voice outcrying
through the poet's
lips, denying
poetry.

 Violent
palpitating beat of
the mind's wings caged.

Dust on the tongue.

Storm
of torn feathers.

Falling.
 Falling—

