

HEAVEN OR HELL: REPRESENTATIONS OF ILFORD IN THE WRITINGS OF DENISE LEVERTOV AND KATHLEEN RAINE

Levertov's poems give the impression of uncertainty about where their author comes from. While 'A Map of the Western Part of the County of Essex in England' (1961) declares she is 'Essex-born', three decades later 'Settling' (1992) insists she is instead 'London-born'. In fact, both assertions are true because Ilford, where Levertov was born in 1923, existed solely within the county of Essex until 1965 when it joined Wanstead and Woodford as part of the London Borough of Redbridge. This ambivalence about identity is replicated in the minds of present-day Ilfordians, who inhabit a liminal space, unsure whether to look westward towards the City, where many of them work, and the East End, from which many of their ancestors came, or eastward towards the Essex countryside, of which Epping Forest marks a prelude.

Ilford's Janus-like orientation is embodied in its past, as well as its present. From the Domesday Book where it was subsumed within the parish of Barking down to 1888 when an Act of Parliament established its independence Ilford remained a predominantly farming hamlet on rural Essex's outer rim. However, an unprecedented building boom during the late Victorian-early Edwardian period began to transform it into the London suburb we know nowadays. Contemporary Ilford is in great part the product of two men, Griggs and Corbett, who built a series of estates to the north of Ilford Station between 1898 and 1907. Their success encouraged other developers to erect less expensive housing south of the railway track. Inevitably, such rapid expansion had a profound impact on Ilford's population. In 1891 just under 11,000 people lived in approximately

2,000 houses. Ten years later there were more than 42,000 residents, occupying almost 8,000 properties. By 1906 the housing stock had risen to 14,000 and by 1911 more than 78,000 people were living within the borough. What kind of suburb did this building boom produce? The properties, as Dane told the Royal Commission on London Government (1921-3), were meant to appeal to ‘a better class [of] population’, by which he meant clerks, shopkeepers and travelling salesmen, and in order to do so the whole area was planned ‘from the parks point of view’, thus avoiding ‘the awful example of our neighbours between us and London’. As a result, while becoming decidedly urban, Ilford nevertheless, by setting aside land for a large number of parks, retained a strong sense of the countryside.¹

However, having succeeded in capturing its targeted residents, what amenities – apart from open spaces - did the new suburb provide? Schools, churches, shops and sports clubs were quickly built, although, due to Griggs and Corbett’s temperance enthusiasms, pubs and off-licences were conspicuously absent. However, without theatre, gallery or concert hall Ilford, unlike Bedford Park or Hampstead Garden Suburb, lacked any sort of cultural aspiration.

Edwardian Ilford was, as a reader of the *Evening News* (3 October 1907) pointed out, ‘not a unity, but a duality’, ‘the line of severance [being] the railway’. Since ‘the difference between the two districts’ was almost as marked as between ‘Kensington and Notting Hill’, it was the ‘ambition of every rightminded Ilfordian’ to ‘migrate as speedily as possible’ to the more salubrious side.² Levertov spent her childhood at 5 Mansfield Road on one of the more prosperous estates to the north of the railway just a street away from the 117-acre Valentines Park. In contrast, Raine was born at 6 Gordon Road,

literally on the "wrong side of the tracks", and although she soon moved to West View in the north of Ilford, which looked across open countryside, circumstances remained, in her estimation, meagre and cramped. These differences clearly go some way to explaining Raine and Levertov's widely contrasting images of their birthplace.

The *Evening-News* correspondent concludes his description of Ilford thus: 'The pattern of houses is splendidly uniform; its street vistas are beautifully monotonous; every front garden is a replica of its neighbour....'³ This proud panegyric, delivered without a trace of irony, describes as positives the very qualities which were used, until quite recently, to construct hostile characterisations of suburbia as a site of impoverished uniformity, both of design and social grouping. Its omnipresent lower-middle-class mentality, it was argued, led to an obsession with gentility and respectability, to a stifling conformity, policed by low-church sermon and circulating gossip, thereby producing a space that oppressed men, but, more particularly, women and children. Suburban petit-bourgeois culture, so the argument went, was at best middle-, at worst low-brow, preferring conspicuous consumption and sport to any artistic or intellectual pursuit. Indeed people trying to maintain a cultural life within the suburbs were seen as doomed to being, like Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, so hopelessly 'out of key with [their] time' that they were forced to leave.

These were the terms with which Modernism dismissed suburbia, privileging instead the metropolis as the site of everything the suburbs lacked: a rich diversity of architecture, class and ethnicity; a freedom of behaviour, holding out the prospect of sexual adventure, such as would interest a flâneur; a strange intermixture of the threatening and the safe, the sordid and the sublime, the unreal and the only too real;

subtle networks of intellectuals; newspapers and magazines discussing the latest ideas; the general cultural ferment that would challenge the would-be artist to innovate, while simultaneously preserving the best of tradition.

However, new cultural studies and postmodern perspectives have led to a reevaluation. Collections like *Visions of Suburbia* (1997) and *Expanding Suburbia* (2000) have argued that the suburbs, far from being peripheral to the project of modernity, engage with its central concerns.⁴ Roger Silverstone, for instance, contends that, despite appearances to the contrary, the suburbs possess a paradoxical complexity, analogous to that of the modernist city: found everywhere, yet rarely noticed; longed for, yet detested; neither wholly urban, nor wholly rural; a reliant by-product of the town, yet attempting separation from it; a manifestation of a well-to-do, confident middle class, yet hiding deep insecurities; a place of apparent stability, yet often experienced as flux; a community designed to be homogenous, yet frequently realising itself in terms of hybridity and the integration of the Other; a location that appears to suppress women, but in fact provides them with the means to organise patterns of empowerment.⁵

In her autobiographical trilogy – *Farewell Happy Fields* (1973), *The Land Unknown* (1975) and *The Lion's Mouth* (1977) – Raine articulates a traditional critique of the suburbs, which largely concentrates on stifling constriction. Adopting Wordsworth's phrase, she repeatedly calls Ilford a 'prison-house', perhaps to remind readers of how many forms that incarceration takes.⁶ There is, initially, architectural confinement. On returning for vacation from Girton's Victorian-Gothic spaciousness, she finds her house even 'smaller...than I had remembered': 'between the garden gate and the front door I had to shrink back into those mean dimensions'.⁷ Ilford, an 'environment devoid of all

culture', represses any stirring of the imagination: 'The mean streets of the Ilfords of the world impose meanness of thought, make ...all but impossible certain kinds of feeling, certain modes of consciousness'.⁸ Its emotional range is so tightly restricted that it cannot generate the kinds of passion that sweep social conventions aside. Hence when in 1922 'Mrs Thompson and her adolescent sailor lover' stab the husband to death and are subsequently hanged, their actions appear wholly untypical: 'in these two,' Raine concludes, 'the flame of life burned too brightly for Ilford....'⁹ She therefore considers it symptomatic that her teenage boyfriend never once 'attempt[ed] to seduce me': suburban 'mores...precluded that'.¹⁰ Ilford's tendency to imprison every aspiration is summed up in its devotion to traditional roles, particularly for women. Her mother expects her to look "pretty", not to 'ruin [her] eyesight over books', to be 'able to accompany songs on the piano' and, eventually, 'to have "a husband and children" as was "natural" for "young girls"'; while her father wants her to become an 'English mistress in a good girls' secondary school' and, after an authentic conversion, a devout Methodist. To the latter end during one summer holiday he encourages her to link up with a group of Wesleyan ministers, but Raine merely senses the restriction of their 'cramped mental spaces'.¹¹ After graduating from Cambridge, she rebels against her parents' limiting expectations, refusing to 'consent to the curbing of winged dreams to fit such a norm', dedicating herself instead to artistic freedom.¹²

Before this final escape Raine constructs a series of partial escapes. In early adolescence she retreats to the hills of literature and biology, the former giving her 'knowledge of...life...other than any accessible to me, unfitting me for Ilford', the latter permitting, by means of the microscope, 'no building estates' to 'obliterate the delicate

order...of the living form'.¹³ Later she allows herself to fall into idealised love for the Beardsleyesque Ilford misfit, Roland Haye, who, by taking her to London's theatres, concert halls and restaurants, opens metropolitan culture's 'golden doors' to her.¹⁴ Finally, shortly before leaving for university she cultivates friendship with Germain d'Hengest, a French 'man of culture', whose 'mental spaciousness' encourages her to expand into European patterns of thought.¹⁵

Raine's complete escape will be to Cambridge, but, although she deems herself at university 'a young barbarian' among upper-middle-class undergraduates, she does not in any sense regard Ilfordians as her 'people', her 'kind'.¹⁶ Those 'shopkeepers', 'city clerks' and 'commercial travellers' are prisoners of materialism: deceived by the 'mirage of affluence', they willingly become 'wage-slave[s]' simply in order to purchase worthless consumer products. Living in a culture cut off from 'anything greater, or other, than themselves', their interest in the 'higher classes' is not in what they 'thought', but what they 'owned'.¹⁷ As she comes from a schoolmaster's family, she has long felt 'a sense...of superiority' over neighbours who 'lacked...literacy', but when she begins to sense the calls of her poetic 'daimon' this feeling grows, believing as she does, with the Romantics, that poets are exalted beings.¹⁸

As an elected poet, she is one of 'the happy few, with Coleridge, with Shelley', an aerial spirit, "half angel and half bird" soaring above Ilfordians, for whom poetry brings 'not peace but a sword' because it demands an elevated level of awareness which they spend their lives avoiding: 'Ilford, considered as a spiritual state, is the place of those who do not wish to...be fully conscious'.¹⁹ Raine, in contrast, is a wholly-aware spiritual aristocrat, kin through her mother's Celtic roots with the Sidhe, the 'lordly ones'

of Irish mythology and therefore, despite her rough social edges, rightfully admitted into Cambridge's 'aristocracy of learning'.²⁰

Levertov's representation of a slightly later Ilford is much more in accord with recent revisionist characterisations of suburbia as a place of teasing paradox, non-conformity, diversity and creative possibility. Whereas Raine sees Ilford in terms of imprisoning restraint, Levertov finds in it a nurturing expansiveness. 'I did grow up,' she declared in 1985, 'in an extraordinarily rich environment'.²¹ The fact that she was educated at home meant she was, more or less, free to pursue her own intellectual interests: 'because of my peculiar upbringing...I've always had a lot of liberty'.²² From an early age she became both voracious reader and precocious poet: 'we had a houseful of books, everybody read...and everybody...did some kind of writing'.²³ In the drawing room she would join an intense cultural enterprise, sketching while her elder sister Olga practised piano or her mother sang lieder or, in the evening, read a classic nineteenth-century novel to the assembled family.²⁴ She expanded into an atmosphere she sometimes called Victorian, but more accurately European: 'my father was naturalised in Eng[land] only around the time I was born – his background was Jewish, Russian, Central European – and my mother, herself proudly Welsh...had lived in Poland, Germany, & Denmark...all the years between 1910 & 1923'.²⁵ Inevitably, with such a prehistory, visitors to the house tended to be cosmopolitan – 'Jewish booksellers, German theologians, Russian priests from Paris, and Viennese opera singers'.²⁶ The pride the young Levertov felt in her family's European otherness extended beyond lifestyle differences to horticulture and home decoration:

...my mother's front garden...was never prim like many of the others along the street but suggested a foreign opulence...Even though our house was...exactly

like its neighbors architecturally, it looked different because it had no half-curtains or venetian blinds...so passers-by could look right in....²⁷

Confronting the curious in the upstairs study window would be ‘not at all what anyone expected to see in Ilford’: a ‘beautiful but slightly wrong-in-scale, not quite life-size statue of Christ the Teacher’.²⁸

Inside the Ilford home Levertov’s mind not only journeyed forward as part of her family’s ongoing cultural pursuits, but also back into its richly complex past:

...my parents – he a converted Russian Jew who...settled in England and was ordained as a priest of the Anglican Church; she a Welshwoman who had grown up in a mining village... - were exotic birds in the plain English coppice of Ilford....²⁹

Behind this colourful ethnic mix were the richly-diverse mystical traditions that the parents drew on: he was descended from ‘Schneour Zalman, the founder of Habad Hasidism’, she from ‘the Welsh tailor and mystic Angel Jones of Mold’.³⁰ Levertov and her sister grew up believing that Zalman and Jones, though coming from ‘very different cultures’, shared a ‘basic kinship’ which would be ‘somehow unified and redeemed in us’.³¹ To this end, Levertov dedicated herself, in ‘Illustrious Ancestors’, to the task of fusing Zalman and Jones’ seemingly-disparate worship of common objects into a poetry which celebrated humble things with a ‘direct’ immediacy, a ‘hard’ objectivity, yet also a sense of their ‘mysterious’ interiority.³² Such a fusion is particularly apparent in her poetry’s characteristic ‘mixture of Christian and Jewish references’, sometimes, as in ‘A Letter for William Kinter of Muhlenberg’ with its allusions to both the Stations of the Cross and Hasidic Zaddikim, within the same poem.³³ This hybrid mode was a fitting tribute to Levertov’s Ilford parents: her mother, a devout Welsh Protestant with, according to Israel Zangwill, ‘a Jewish soul’; her father, a ‘*Jewish* Christian’ and ‘pioneer

of the Hebrew Christian movement' which tried to reconcile Anglicanism with Judaism at both doctrinal and liturgical levels.³⁴ Although his great work, which drew on 'Hasidic lore' to view 'the Holy Spirit as Shekinah', Yahweh's feminine component, was lost, he did institute at Holy Trinity, Shoreditch, a syncretic Eucharist, called 'The Meal of the Holy King' in honour of the name Hasids gave to their communal repasts.³⁵ The family's expansive hybridity seemed to gain wider confirmation during Levertov's childhood as thousands of Jews moved from the East End to Ilford, preserving their culture in the form of synagogues, kosher butchers and delicatessens, yet otherwise integrating fully with the nominally Christian population. Indeed by describing herself as 'Hybrid Me',³⁶ Levertov was, among other things, discounting the notion of the suburbs as embodying a restrictive uniformity hostile to difference. Of Ilford's reaction to her Jewishness, for instance, she has said: 'I never felt myself discriminated against'.³⁷

Levertov's sense of suburban liberation, however, was as much physical as intellectual: 'I was given a great deal of freedom to roam about outdoors as soon as I'd learned to cross streets safely'.³⁸ In these expeditions she made stronger connections with the local community than Raine ever managed, thereby overcoming both the sense of herself as 'rootless', 'at home everywhere and nowhere', and the alienating impetus of her home education, which made her 'among school children a strange exception whom they did not know whether to envy or distrust'.³⁹

Next door was a girl three years older than I who was a friend and there was another in the next street. I used to go to [Valentines Park]...[and] pick up...slum kids from the other end of town...we'd fish for sticklebacks and things....⁴⁰

In addition to these playmates, she met in the park a middle-class 'kindred spirit', Jean Rankin, with whom she formed 'a Secret Society...called The Adventure Seekers' in order to act out fantasy games.⁴¹ It is no wonder she said of her childhood: 'I never felt lonely'.⁴²

Roaming beyond the parks into Depression Ilford, Levertov became her painfully aware that the 'slum kids' she played with hailed from an impoverished, largely unemployed working-class community to the south of the station that was altogether less privileged than the conservative, middle-class one in which she lived, thus causing her to expand beyond her family's liberalism to a naïve, yet sincere radical commitment. Hence the twelve-year-old accompanied her sister to the Ilford Young-Communist-League office to offer her services and soon, without her parents' knowledge, she was selling *The Socialist Worker* on 'Saturday mornings' in the 'streets off Ilford Lane'.⁴³

Just as Levertov connected with the surrounding population through activism and play, so did the whole family construct their own links by broadening their cultural projects out into the community. Olga, for instance, whom the local paper lauded as 'probably the most accomplished girl in Ilford', ran a local dramatic society that rehearsed in the back garden during the summer of 1931 *Paul Among the Jews*, the Werfel play which her father had translated and in which Olivier had starred in the West End, subsequently performing it to great acclaim at the Town Hall.⁴⁴ Levertov herself made her own connections between domestic cultural activity and the outside world – not with Ilford, however, but the metropolis beyond – when at the age of 12 she started studying ballet, painting and music in London. Although 'the wholly apolitical world of the ballet school' rapidly quenched her enthusiasm for selling socialist newspapers in

South Ilford, she never felt, as Raine did, that her suburb was inimical to culture – whether it be political or artistic.⁴⁵ Her sister had proved the contrary. Similarly, London did not become for her, as for Raine, what Ilford was not, but an extension of it. Travelling on the 25 bus to Oxford Circus or the train to Liverpool Street, she continued reading the books she had read at home, thus advancing her education peripatetically. Wandering around the V. and A. in her free moments and discovering ‘history// as I desired it: magical, specific,/ jumbled, unstinting’ and attending ballet and theatre productions, she gained insights that enriched her life in Ilford, although they ultimately problematised it by making her family's religious emphasis seem ‘embarrassing’.⁴⁶ This cultural continuity is symbolised by the violinist Levertov used to follow onto the train at Ilford Station in order to sit next to his performing monkey. Later, while ‘queuing for the ballet or a play’ in the West End, she often heard ‘the busker’s violin’ and saw the monkey, Jinny, collecting money in a hat, and she would feel ‘as proud to know her personally as if she had been one of the great dancers or actors I was queuing to see’.⁴⁷ Indeed so enriching was that journey that she makes it an emblem for time’s swift passing and for simultaneity in ‘Evening Train’ (1992). An old ‘peasant’ she shares an Italian carriage with morphs into a child of ‘ten’ and she herself becomes a fourteen-year old ‘girl with braids’, ‘watching the faces I saw each day/ on the train going in to London’. This man’s mysterious dual aspect – both ageing body in an Italian present and ‘invisible boy’ in an English past – earns him, like the poor Jewish ‘broom-vendor’ in ‘From the Roof’, the title of ‘hidden one’, one of those prophets Hasids believed took the form of beggars, the poor or aged. Through this allusion Levertov is linking her life’s end with its beginning, with the Ilford home where her father would come down from

translating *The Zohar* in his study to talk about such figures of popular Jewish mysticism.⁴⁸

This unbroken link between London and Ilford could, however, teach more unsettling lessons, revealing the destructive currents under the suburb's seemingly placid surface.⁴⁹ When Levertov performed at a pan-London church pageant in the Albert Hall, aged 6, she would travel back on the bus with a fellow participant, Pauline, who used to go on to Seven Kings, 'a few stops further on than the Ilford Broadway where we got off'. Pauline's elder brother, who sometimes accompanied them and who may well have 'acted in [Olga's Werfel] production' was later hanged for murdering an elderly couple in the Essex Marshes. In shame the family moved away, changed their name, but sixty years later Levertov was still wondering: 'If [Pauline]'s still alive...does she recall our long bus rides, eastward on the #25 through the thrilling London evenings...?'⁵⁰ A hanging which confirmed to the young Raine Ilford's limitations revealed to Levertov the way it held faith and felony, adventure and infamy in disturbing proximity.

In contrast to Levertov's revisionist representation, Raine restates the traditional critique of the suburbs, but not in a servile manner. She transforms it by mythologising her early experiences. The Romantics saw the city as a site of oppression. Blake notices 'mind-forged manacles' everywhere in London; Coleridge remembers his childhood, 'pent 'mid [the capital's] cloisters dim'; Wordsworth detects the city's 'prison-house' shadows falling across the growing child.⁵¹ Romantic writers, as Wolfreys has shown, tend towards a 'citephobia', which reacts with anxiety and loathing to the megapolis' monstrous, chaotic, benighted otherness.⁵² Raine takes this loose grouping of Romantic apprehensions and combines them into a mythological system, which she then applies to

the suburbs with Ilford representing a species of hell and London, though occasionally reverting to hellishness,⁵³ representing in the main a blessed means of escape. In constructing this system, she was in some sense adapting for the twentieth-century the mythological world of the writer on whom devoted much of her intellectual life: William Blake. However, by rejecting her father's utopian socialism she made sure there was no place for Blake's political radicalism in this revised system.

Raine's symbolic intent is immediately apparent in the title of her autobiography's first part, *Farewell Happy Fields*. She is Milton's Eve, mourning a lost paradise in a fallen world. The happy fields she refers to are those surrounding the village of Great Bavington in Northumbria, to which she was sent for a period during World War I:

...there I found, in the few short years I lived at the manse with my Aunty Peggy Black my own image of...Paradise... Paradise is a state of being in which inner and outer reality are at one, the world in harmony with imagination.... In Northumbria I knew myself in my own place....

However, because she was born not 'in Northumbria but...an East London suburb' this Paradise had already been 'lost before [her] birth' for Ilford, in contrast, was a 'suburban Hades', in which she felt insubstantial and alien.⁵⁴ Such a reaction was to be expected because Ilfordians came from 'the world of the dead', their voices like 'ghosts in Hades'.⁵⁵ Thus an Ilford family met in Brittany are described as 'underworld people who had followed us up from Hades into the sunlight of France'.⁵⁶ The reference to Persephone here is deliberate because Raine cast herself in that role opposite her mother's Demeter, but with the difference that her mother was 'imprisoned in Hades', while she, the daughter, was 'neither willing nor able to rescue her'.⁵⁷ Though she would eventually escape the suburbs, Raine was so contaminated by them that when her boyfriend introduced her to his cultured acquaintances, she sensed that they perceived her

as ‘kore smelling of Hades’.⁵⁸ The relationship with Haye certainly allowed her to extend her mythological repertoire: while being escorted home, she became ‘Euridice’, led through the Stygian ‘bye-roads of Ilford’ by her ‘Orpheus-like’ guide.⁵⁹

At one point in the autobiography Raine’s nerve fails and she wonders whether ‘the Ilfords of this world’ are too palpably ‘a terrible negation’ to be accorded ‘even the dignity that belongs to the hells of traditional cosmogonies’, but she regains her confidence in the mythological rhetoric as soon as she recalls the London station, linked to Ilford by the railway: ‘I was ashamed that I must return from Liverpool Street Station, where the world ended and the underworld began’.⁶⁰ Liverpool Street Station could take you beyond to the paradise of London’s metropolitan culture or out to Cambridge – and ‘Cambridge, because it was not Ilford, seemed to me Paradise’.⁶¹

However, Raine did not regard the Heaven and Hell of her system as a simple binary opposition. Infernal Ilford, when the ideal purity of nature or the arts was for a while allowed to assert itself, could afford glimpses of Paradise and Edenic London and Cambridge, when they were untrue to their radiant selves, glimpses of the underworld. For instance, during those three brief years between the move to West View in 1911 and the outbreak of the First World War, ‘there was something Paradisal even in Ilford...’: ‘West View was still in Paradise: for with the spring the fields beyond our garden blossomed, and I, Persephone in Ida gathering flowers, astray for hours of golden eternity in the meadows...’⁶² Nearby in Valentines Park ‘blackbirds did “so rinse and wring the ear” in rhododendron-dells that the park still seemed the sanctuary it had once been’.⁶³ However, post-war development saw the felling of the elms outside her house and the building of ‘mean’ shops opposite, which blocked her rural vista. Thereafter faint

intimations of Eden were only possible when Ilford evinced uncharacteristically transcendent moments. Thus sitting ‘caged in [a] little suburban back room’, she listens rapt while her boyfriend plays Chopin and ‘the music’ speaks ‘its message of Paradise’.⁶⁴ Her ironic description of the relationship with Haye as a ‘suburban idyll’ cannot wholly erase the allusion to Arcadia: ‘my first love was... an epiphany of human love as it was in the first earthly paradise’.⁶⁵ Similarly, her cultural flirtation with d’Hangest ‘opened’ for her in Ilford ‘invisible doors into the timeless/ Fields of Elysium’.⁶⁶ In contrast, when she duplicitously marries Hugh Sykes after graduation simply in order to stay in Cambridge, the city becomes ‘Dis’, the ‘hell’ in which the couple suffer. Similarly, struggling to survive in London during and after the Second World War she can experience the city variously as ‘Hell’ or ‘Hades’.⁶⁷ Cambridge and London, because they were human constructs, could never be paradise unalloyed and it was not until she ventured beyond her mother’s Highlands to Gavin Maxwell’s Western Isles that she discovered ‘the one Paradise’, the paradise that she had thought ‘lost’.⁶⁸

If Ilford was for Raine Hell, for Levertov it was a kind of Paradise. Her contribution to suburbia’s representation resides, like Raine’s, in her mythological interpretation of early experience. She applies to Ilford both the pastoral myth of childhood as Earthly Paradise and the Wordsworthian myth of the poet’s growth, nurtured and educated by Nature, although, being suburban, her Nature is, of course, not wild, but manicured. Moreover, despite its Wordsworthian rhetoric, Levertov’s suburban poetry is, in a sense, more a descendent of Jonson, Marvell and Pope, whose pastoral verse extols the man-made beauty of the gardens and grounds of Sabine country estates. However, where these poetic ancestors see the land as a natural embodiment of a just hierarchical structure,

Levertov is much more democratic: within parks open to everybody the children of the well-to-do and the poor can meet on level terms and construct their own egalitarian play.

Levertov's strategy of representing Ilford in both Arcadian and Wordsworthian terms was made possible by the fact that whereas Raine concentrated on the suburb's bricks and mortar, she concerned herself with its gardens, extensive parks and a 'western end', which, in her day, was 'still country'.⁶⁹ Suburban nature began for her in Ilford's private brick-walled gardens. Climbing, with friends, over the wall of a 'boarded-up' Victorian 'mansion' in Cranbrook Road, she experiences an 'ecstatic vision' of a flowering magnolia of 'transcendent beauty'. However, she is immediately put to flight when a 'hairy, purple-faced' tramp charges out of the house. This episode, which she labels 'the devil in paradise', becomes for her a poetic lesson in the sublime:

Wasn't it one of the earliest intimations of how close to one another are beauty and terror...? The tree in full splendor, enclosed in a walled garden, its temenos, hidden...Our sight of it an epiphany, a glimpse...of an earthly beauty beyond all expectation. And at that precise instant, the raging monster exploding from the long-closed mansion....⁷⁰

Poetry, she implies, can arrive in life's sacred groves where forces beyond the material present overwhelm the ego with their beauty and power, as Raine, who founded the journal *Temenos* in 1980 and the Temenos Academy in 1990, also believed.

By introducing Levertov to a similar conjunction of natural beauty and immensity in their own back-garden, her mother assumes the role of Muse making the infant neophyte aware of the terms of her poetic vocation:

(It was she
who taught me to look;
to name the flowers when I was still close to the ground,
my face level with theirs;
or to watch the sublime metamorphoses
unfold and unfold

over the walled back gardens of our street...)
(The 90th Year)⁷¹

Such training made sure Levertov would produce a poetry of exactly, intensely scrutinised natural objects, but one not discouraged by the implied objection of Wordsworthians: how can the sublime be experienced among Essex's flatness? True, Essex has no Snowden and no Alps, but it shares with East Anglia the huge skies that Constable celebrated. Thus Levertov is in no way presumptuous in viewing magnificent cloud formations above her infant head as intimating a sublime infinity by unfolding so far beyond her limited back lot.

Iford lacked mountains, but it did have a Public Library, which first showed Levertov how mountains such as the ones she had seen in her mother's native Wales could be transformed into art when she borrowed Mack's *Paul Cezanne* at the age of 13. However, unlike Cezanne's Mont Ste. Victoire with its 'aloof...massive geometry of rock', the Welsh mountains of Levertov's youth and Mount Ranier of her last years are mysterious, sublime, epiphanic sites.⁷² Hence while mother and daughter are mushroom-picking in Snowdonia, 'clouds about [their] knees', 'suddenly':

the lifting of it, the mist rolls
quickly away, and far, far –

'Look!' she grips me, 'It is
Eryri!'

(The Instant)⁷³

By using the Welsh name for Snowdon, Levertov is demonstrating her engagement not just with the 'here-and-now', but also 'the world of Welsh legend' – of Merlin and the Mabinogion.⁷⁴

This experience of mountains' sublimity did not negate suburban sublimity, but was continuous with it. Nature could operate in the prescribed Wordsworthian manner in both locations. For instance, Valentines Park and the River Roding could summon the young Levertov, listen to her secrets and protect her from danger:

Cranbrook Wash called me into its dark tunnel,
the little streams of Valentines heard my resolves,
Roding held my head above water when I thought it was
drowning me....

(A Map of the Western Part of the County of Essex in England)⁷⁵

Unsurprisingly, Levertov called the memoir, in which she finally threw off the false god of ballet and dedicated herself wholly to poetry 'My Prelude'.⁷⁶ However, although that epic continued to inspire her throughout her life, she did diverge from Wordsworth in applying to nature a patina of classical myth.⁷⁷ In 'The Well', for instance, while dreaming of a woman in a 'dark habit' scooping spring water into a 'pitcher', then setting off in a 'barge' across the 'dark lake' of a 'baroque park', Levertov is transported back to 'Valentines, a place of origin' in order to gain neo-classical validation of her poetic calling:

...I know she is the Muse
and that the humble
tributary of Roding is
one with Alpheus, the god who as a river
flowed through the salt sea to his love's well....⁷⁸

Even unspectacular suburban nature is capable of sustaining a classical myth of poetic creation, charged with mystery and erotic desire.

Although Ilford's parks and gardens could provide Levertov with images of redemptive freshness, they were never far from contamination or desecration. Thus when, after decades in America, she returned to Valentines Park with its archetypal 'first river'

and ‘first field’, she finds the very well she had celebrated for its divine purity ‘filled to the shallow brim/ with debris of a culture’s sickness....’⁷⁹ Moreover, in *Sands of the Well* (1996), the last collection before her death, she questions – in Wordsworthian terms – the whole project of raising suburban nature to a similar level of grandeur: did she hyperbolically dress ‘the commonplace in robes of glory’, ‘make of Valentines, long ago,/ a wilder place than it was’? The answer finds her verse not dishonestly exaggerated, but alert to hidden potential:

With the will to see
more than is there, one comes, at moments,
to perceive the more that there is....
(Something More)⁸⁰

These intimations of sadness and decay were, however, there from the beginning. Levertov realised, with Poussin’s shepherds, ‘Et in Arcadia Ego’. She sensed from early infancy, for instance, that the family gardener was part of a disturbing symbolic order:

Old Day the gardener seemed
Death himself, or Time, scythe in hand

by the sundial and freshly-dug
grave in my book of parables.
(A Figure of Time)⁸¹

‘Clothed in colors of ash and earth’, he became for her ‘a capricious demigod... bring[ing] life and blossom, death and burial to the rectangular sanctums closed off from each other by walls of brick....’⁸²

Old Day, as it were, presided over Olga’s tragically early death. Her nine-years-older sister had first shown Levertov Ilford’s magical possibilities:

In Valentines
a root protrudes from the greensward several yards from its tree

we might raise like a trapdoor’s handle, you said,

and descend long steps to another country....
(Olga Poems)⁸³

She had also demonstrated to Levertov how determined walking could convert Ilford into Essex countryside, giving her the confidence that no matter how far they roamed, they would always return safely:

We were benighted but not lost, and I trusted
utterly that at last,
however late, we'd get home.
No owl, no lights, the dun ridges

Of ploughland fading. No matter.
I trusted you.

(To Olga)⁸⁴

Thus whenever she went alone to Wanstead Park, whose 'interior was the one place considered out-of-bounds', she would feel Olga's reassuring presence:

I never crossed the bridge over the Roding, dividing
the open field of the present from the mysteries,
the wraiths and shifts of time-sense Wanstead Park held suspended,
without remembering your eyes.

(Olga Poems)⁸⁵

However, this Ilford of youthful fantasy and liberation took on more constricting overtones as Levertov began to hear in America tales of Olga's increasing paranoia, manipulation and genius for hurting anyone who tried to help and although her sister remained Levertov's role model throughout her American activism, she had to concede in her moving elegy, 'Olga Poems', that even at the beginning in Ilford there was something slightly manic about Olga's political anger:

What rage
and human shame swept you
when you were nine and saw
the Ley Street houses,

grasping their meaning as slum....⁸⁶

While Levertov preserved her links with Ilford, Raine sought to sever them. Her life's project was to evoke glimpses of paradise in verse and Ilford as the abode of the damned represented all that was inimical to poetry. Even before she entered Cambridge, Raine had concluded that 'to write poetry in, from, or for Ilford was impossible' and thus not only was the suburb barely mentioned in her verse, it did not even survive in her imagination as possible material for poetic transformation:

Very few of the things I saw in Ilford... would ever belong to what imagination retrieves from time lost...nearly all from Ilford which I have not forgotten or rejected is of dreams and fantasies...of certain stories which have over me the magical power of dreams.⁸⁷

What she did retrieve were those untypical moments when music or nature allowed Ilford to transcend itself. Waiting to listen to her granddaughter take part in a performance of Rossini's 'Petit Messe Solennelle' in a church in Ilford or Bromley (she is unsure which), Raine sits among suburbanites whom 'you would have thought...could know little of paradise', yet when the music begins eternity enters time as each singer is 'transfigured.../ The soul in every face/ Made visible, reflecting heaven'. So unexpected is this transformation that Raine is shocked out of her habitual elitism: '...the face of every soul is beautiful -/ In outer suburb, inner city....'⁸⁸

The family garden could provide similar Edenic intimations. A late poem describes how a lifelong search for 'my mother's nameless rose', whose 'trusses of pearl-/Shell-petalled flowers/ Climbed to my first window-sill', ends in Italy with a plant which is 'the same.../But I was not' because years of 'estrangement, my mother's sorrow' had intervened.⁸⁹ The guilt underlying 'Nameless Rose' crystallised for Raine in an incident

of 'cruelty' more 'murderous' than 'many murders' on her first return from Girton, which her mother so keenly anticipated, but she dreaded:

...all had been dusted and polished with love. In the middle of the dining-table... stood...a blue and white vase of cheap Chinese ware; in it was a spray of mimosa. My mother asked me if I did not think it was beautiful; and, God forgive me, I said No. I repulsed her, and refused the flower she offered me.⁹⁰

'Mimosa-Spray' sees this denial as a spurning of the chance to find paradise in unpromising suburban circumstances:

I who have rifled the world's beauty
Now will never enter
That golden garden she offered me.⁹¹

The rejection was all the more terrible because her mother, like Levertov's, had used the Ilford garden to teach her daughter a love of natural beauty which later found expression in verse: '...it was she who made me a poet'.⁹²

Oddly for someone who studied natural sciences at Cambridge, Raine does not relish for its intricate particularity the natural beauty that survives precariously in the Ilford garden of her youth or London garden of her old age and vigorously in Northumbria and the Scottish Highlands. Instead she simplifies it into symbols of an ideal beauty existing beyond the world of appearances. The earth's thick specificity is reduced to a 'thin.../veil stretched over apparent time and space', a 'curtain...drawn' to reveal 'reality behind...seeming'. Only by being given a spurious equivalence with natural objects – 'the high unchanging country beyond time', 'the bright mountain behind the mountain' and so on – are these insubstantial neo-Platonic forms lent any sort of solidity. It is not until the end of her life that Raine learns to appreciate the cluttered thinginess of things: 'This inexhaustible, untidy world - / I would not have it otherwise'.⁹³ She could have curbed her abstract tendencies by adopting Imagism, which, along with Metaphysical

poetry, ‘set a fashion’ in the Cambridge of the twenties, but she rejected it for being, like Russell and Wittgenstein’s logical positivism, atheistic Bloomsbury, the Cavendish laboratory and Empson’s de-idealising poetry, an expression of the rationalistic materialism of the age: Imagist poets were merely behaviourists, who believed that ‘nothing is in the mind which was not first in the senses’, and therefore they only succeeded in producing ‘haiku...without the Zen metaphysics’.⁹⁴

Levertov did adopt Imagism – largely in the form of its Objectivist offshoot – but only after she had emigrated to America. There Pound taught her the importance of ‘taking responsibility for the precision of what you say’ and avoiding ‘self-indulgent sentimentalism’, while William Carlos Williams, who became both correspondent and friend, had more fundamental lessons to impart:

...Williams helped me to deal more directly with my life experience...in less literary, more concrete, and less vague language. He helped me bridge the gap between the idiomatic language we all use and the more rarified language of my life as a...solitary reader...He helped me deal with being a grown woman, with a husband...baby and very little money in a strange country....⁹⁵

If she had not changed ‘the tools’ of her English ‘neo-romanticism’ in America, it is difficult’ to imagine how [she] would have absorbed and reflected the changes in [her]...life’ because these tools were not designed to register all that was happening around her. Talking of the poems in her first volume, *The Double Image* (1946), Levertov remarked that one would never know ‘there was a war on’: ‘I wasn’t capable of dealing with that material – they’re about my adolescent inner feelings...wooshy, vaguely dreamy feelings’.⁹⁶ These romantic emotions were generally expressed through the medium of dream or myth rather than actuality in poems whose ‘richly sensuous, image-filled music’ tended to produce an effect of ‘lushness and sentimentality’.⁹⁷ The

impression the volume makes is one of ‘muzzy adolescent vagueness’. Every detail is presented with a high degree of generality: ‘...if I mention a tree, there’ll be a generic tree’ and not ‘an oak...or...birch or whatever it specifically was’.⁹⁸ Thus ‘Christmas 1944’, the most specific of the poems, can mention a ‘tree’ without specifying what kind of Christmas fir it was. The setting is, presumably, the Ilford family home, but there is no reference to the iron railings taken away to help the war effort or the neighbouring houses flattened by bombs⁹⁹ and hardly any to fellow Jews suffering terrible persecution in Nazi-controlled lands. Although it is collectively ‘dreaming of Europe’, all the family can summon is an insidious continental wind to reveal how thin a protective covering the Christmas festivities provide:

The wind has tales to tell of sea and city,
A plague on many houses, fear knocking on the doors....¹⁰⁰

Had Levertov been exposed to Imagism while still in England, she might have been able to integrate her mythicising tendencies with the clear notations of sense data from London and its suburbs, as H.D. managed to do in her wartime *Trilogy*, a sequence of poems which Levertov came to admire most out of all of her work :¹⁰¹

An incident here and there,
and rails gone (for guns)
from your (and my) old town square:

mist and mist-grey, no colour,
still the Luxor bee, chick and hare
pursue unalterable purpose...

there, as here, ruin opens
the tomb, the temple; enter,
there as here, there are no doors.... (*The Walls Do Not Fall*, i)¹⁰²

To conclude, although there are some negative shadings, Levertov's characterisation of Ilford is, in general, so diametrically opposed to Raine's – one predominantly paradisaical, the other substantially stygian – that one struggles to find any way to link the two beyond the obvious connections of shared birthplace and poetic vocation. However, when researching his *Potted History of Ilford*, Norman Gunby wrote to Raine, asking her for memories of the Levertoffs. She replied that she clearly remembered Paul Levertoff, 'a most impressive and beautiful man, who...preached most movingly in the Hospital Chapel' just off the High Road. Perhaps in an Ilford sermon by the Reverend Levertoff weighing the respective merits of heaven and hell the two poets finally find a common ground.¹⁰³

Notes

¹ Alan A. Jackson, *Semi-Detached London: Suburban Development, Life and Transport 1903-39* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1973), 59-70.

² *Ibid.*, 64.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Roger Silverstone, ed., *Visions of Suburbia* (London: Routledge, 1997); Roger Webster, ed., *Expanding Suburbia: Reviewing Suburban Narratives* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000).

⁵ Silverstone, 1-25.

⁶ Kathleen Raine, *Collected Poems* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 2000), 106; *Farewell Happy Fields: Memories of Childhood* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1973), 88, 115, 116, 157, 158.

⁷ Kathleen Raine, *The Land Unknown* (London: Hamish Hamilton), 54.

⁸ Raine, *Farewell*, 133; *Land*, 15.

⁹ Raine, *Farewell*, 103.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 129, 166.

¹² *Ibid.*, Note 7, 57.

¹³ Raine, *Farewell*, 114, 116.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 109, 167.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102, 106, 111.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 169-172.

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- ²⁰ Raine, *Farewell*, 102, 115; *Land*, 13-14.
- ²¹ Jeni Couzyn, ed., *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1985), 77.
- ²² Jewel Spears Brooker, ed., *Conversations with Denise Levertov* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 111.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 52, 87, 109.
- ²⁴ Denise Levertov, *Tesserae: Memories and Suppositions* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1997), 43-44.
- ²⁵ Christopher MacGowan, ed., *The Letters of Denise Levertov and William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1998), 100.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, Note 22, 125.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, Note 21, 75.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, note 24, 114-115.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, Note 21, 75.
- ³⁰ Denise Levertov, *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 70; *Conversations*, 125.
- ³¹ Levertov, *Poet*, 70.
- ³² Denise Levertov, *Collected Earlier Poems 1940-1960* (New York: New Directions, 1979), 77-78.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 60-67; *Poet*, 75-77.
- ³⁴ Denise Levertov, *Oblique Prayers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986), 33; *Tesserae*, 11, 142; Jorge Quinonez, 'Paul Phillip Levertov: Pioneering Hebrew-Christian Scholar and Leader', *Mishkan* 37 (2002), 21.
- ³⁵ Levertov, *Oblique*, 33; Roger Tomes, 'Jewish and Christian Liturgical Collaboration?', Centre for Jewish Studies, University of Manchester, 5-6.
- ³⁶ Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi, eds., *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 621.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, Note 22, 90.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, Note 21, 77.
- ³⁹ Brooker, 103; MacGowan, 100; Couzyn, 76.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Note 22, 111.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Note 24, 59.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, Note 22, 111.
- ⁴³ Couzyn, 78; Levertov, *Tesserae*, 66-70.
- ⁴⁴ *Iford Recorder*, 15 April 1934; Levertov, *Tesserae*, 48-49, 139-140.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Note 24, 70.
- ⁴⁶ Denise Levertov, *Poems 1972-1982* (New York: New Directions, 2001), 221; Brooker, 144.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Note 24, 72-73.
- ⁴⁸ Denise Levertov, *A Door in the Hive and Evening Train* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1993), 164; *Poems 1960-1967* (New York: New Directions, 1983), 51; *Poet*, 76-77.
- ⁴⁹ Webster, 1-13.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Note 24, 144-146.
- ⁵¹ Blake, 'London'; Coleridge, 'Frost at Midnight'; Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality'.
- ⁵² Julian Wolfreys, *Writing London: The Trace of the Urban Text from Blake to Dickens* (London: Palgrave, 1998), 95-39.
- ⁵³ Kathleen Raine, *Selected Poems* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1988), 150, 152; *Collected*, 317.
- ⁵⁴ Raine, *Farewell*, 78-79; 124, 147.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 99, 168.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Note 7, 53-54; *Collected*, 107-108.
- ⁵⁸ Raine, *Farewell*, 157.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Note 7, 13.
- ⁶² Raine, *Farewell*, 81, 85.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 85.

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- ⁶⁴ Ibid., 134.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 124, 155.
- ⁶⁶ Raine, *Selected*, 145-146.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., Note 7, 70, 144, 149.
- ⁶⁸ Raine, *Collected*, 165, 179-214.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., Note 21, 75-76.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., Note 24, 53-56.
- ⁷¹ Levertov, *Poems 1972*, 97-98.
- ⁷² Ibid., Note 24, 103-107.
- ⁷³ Ibid., Note 32, 65-66.
- ⁷⁴ Levertov, *Poet*, 69, 72.
- ⁷⁵ Levertov, *Poems 1960*, 21-22.
- ⁷⁶ Denise Levertov, *Light up the Cave* (New York: New Directions, 1981), 244-253.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid., Note 36, 39-40, 369.
- ⁷⁸ Levertov, *Poems 1960*, 40-41.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid., 22; 'The Stricken Children', *Breathing the Water* (New York: New Directions, 1987), 33.
- ⁸⁰ Denise Levertov, *Sands of the Well* (New York: New Directions, 1996), 63.
- ⁸¹ Levertov, *Poems 1960*, 101.
- ⁸² Ibid., Note 24, 49-51.
- ⁸³ Levertov, *Poems 1960*, 207-208.
- ⁸⁴ Levertov, *Breathing*, 25.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid., Note 24, 60; *Poems 1960*, 209.
- ⁸⁶ Levertov, *Poems 1960*, 203-210, 238-239.
- ⁸⁷ Raine, *Farewell*, 84-85, 90, 172.
- ⁸⁸ Raine, *Collected*, 325-326.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid., 296-297.
- ⁹⁰ Ibid., Note 7, 54.
- ⁹¹ Raine, *Collected*, 283.
- ⁹² Ibid., 107-108; *The Lion's Mouth* (1977) in *Autobiographies* (London: Skoob Books, 1991), 283.
- ⁹³ Raine, *Collected*, 83-86, 113-114, 128-129, 130-131, 132, 336-337.
- ⁹⁴ Kathleen Raine, *Defending Ancient Springs* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 107, 132-133, 157, 164; *Land*, 29, 31, 40-43, 59.
- ⁹⁵ Ibid., Note 22, 14, 68, 92.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid., 64, 79-80.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid., Note 76, 31, 33-34; *Poet*, 63-67; *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 196; Brooker, 88.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid., Note 22, 74, 154.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid., Note 24, 50.
- ¹⁰⁰ Denise Levertov, *The Double Image* (London: Cresset Press, 1946), 24.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid., Note 22, 24-25; *Poet*, 244-245.
- ¹⁰² H.D., *Trilogy: The Walls Do Not Fall, Tribute to the Angels, The Flowering of the Rod* (Cheadle Hulme: Carcanet Press, 1973), 3.
- ¹⁰³ Norman Gunby, *A Potted History of Ilford* (Southend: Privately Printed, 1991), 163.