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Relearning the Political Alphabet: Levertov's Language Ethics from Vietnam to the Present

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Abstract

This article argues that Denise Levertov's Vietnam-era poetry develops a poetics of language ethics: a formal practice through which words are tested against bodies, suffering, agency, and moral judgment. Focusing on "During the Eichmann Trial," "Life at War," and "Prologue: An Interim," the essay examines how Levertov exposes the bureaucratic, legal, and military languages that render violence administrable and morally tolerable. Drawing on Levertov's poetics, postwar American poetics, Hannah Arendt's account of moral thoughtlessness, and critical discourse analysis, it shows how quotation, fragmentation, lineation, apostrophe, parataxis, and bodily imagery resist abstraction and restore ethical perception. By situating these poems within the Eichmann trial, the Vietnam War, the Boston Five prosecution, and antiwar protest culture, the article presents Levertov's work as a historically specific model of linguistic vigilance and poetic witness, one that remains alert to the ethical vulnerability of public language today.

Keywords: Denise Levertov; language ethics; Vietnam War poetry; political discourse; poetic witness; critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Denise Levertov's Vietnam-era poetry is not only a poetry of protest; it is also a sustained inquiry into the ethical life of language. In poems such as "During the Eichmann Trial" (Levertov 1983, pp. 63–64), "Life at War" (Levertov 1983, pp. 229–30), and "Prologue: An Interim" (Levertov 1987, pp. 129–34), Levertov examines how bureaucratic, legal, military, and public discourse can detach words from perception, responsibility, and human consequence. This article argues that her Vietnam-era poetry develops a poetics of language ethics: a formal practice through which poetry tests whether words remain answerable to bodies, actions, suffering, and moral judgment. Rather than treating Levertov's political poems simply as antiwar statements, the essay reads them as investigations into the linguistic conditions that make violence administrable and morally tolerable.

The argument is historical before it is contemporary. Levertov writes from within the specific pressures of the Eichmann trial, the Vietnam War, the Boston Five prosecution, antiwar protest, and the broader crisis of public language in the 1960s. Her poems respond to a moment in which institutional discourse repeatedly sought to make obedience appear neutral, destruction necessary, and dissent criminal. Yet her work does not merely oppose such language thematically. Through quotation, fragmentation, lineation, juxtaposition, apostrophe, and lyric address, Levertov formally interrupts the operations of official speech and restores attention to the bodies and responsibilities that abstraction conceals.



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The article therefore uses contemporary political discourse only as a limited concluding frame, not as a second object of equal weight. Trump-era rhetoric, with its euphemisms, dehumanizing metaphors, strategic ambiguity, and attacks on shared evidence, clarifies the continued relevance of Levertov's concern with the ethical degradation of public language. The point is not that contemporary U.S. rhetoric simply repeats Vietnam-era discourse, nor that Levertov should be read anachronistically as a commentator on the present. Rather, her poetry offers a historically situated model of linguistic vigilance whose force lies in teaching readers to ask what public language conceals, whose suffering it abstracts, and how poetic form can reactivate ethical perception.

The essay proceeds in four stages. It first defines the theoretical and methodological framework of language ethics, drawing on Levertov's poetics, Hannah Arendt's account of bureaucratic speech and moral thoughtlessness, and critical discourse analysis. It then turns to "During the Eichmann Trial," where Levertov restores number to face and obedience to judgment. The following section reads the Boston Five trial and "Life at War" as related scenes in which law, protest, bodily vulnerability, and poetic witness converge. Finally, the essay examines "Prologue: An Interim" as Levertov's most explicit meditation on semantic inversion and counter-discourse, before returning briefly to the contemporary afterlife of the linguistic crisis her Vietnam-era poems so powerfully diagnose.

By reading Levertov's poetry alongside legal rhetoric, political theory, and protest culture—from the Boston Five trial to contemporary regimes of detention and deportation—this article situates her work within a broader American struggle over who controls meaning. Levertov's poetry does not simply resist war; it resists the linguistic conditions that make war narratively survivable. Her counter-discourse insists on restoring words to their ethical weight, forcing public language to carry what the state and its proxies seek to displace: responsibility, suffering, and human presence. In an era marked by "alternative facts," algorithmic misinformation, and the routinization of cruelty through sanitized vocabulary, Levertov's insistence on linguistic integrity acquires renewed urgency.

2. How Language Answers to the World

This article uses language ethics to describe the conditions under which language remains accountable to the realities it names. The term does not refer simply to truthful, humane, or morally admirable speech. Rather, it designates a relation among linguistic form, reference, perception, and responsibility. Language becomes ethically compromised when words cease to register the bodies, actions, agents, and consequences to which they point; when speech smooths over harm, diffuses agency, or allows institutional vocabulary to stand in place of moral judgment. Conversely, language becomes ethically reparative when it restores pressure between word and world: when it makes abstraction answerable to bodily suffering, reconnects action to accountability, and reopens the possibility of recognition where official discourse has dulled or displaced it.

The framework draws first on Levertov's own poetics, especially her insistence that language is not a set of manipulable counters but a power capable of shaping perception, consciousness, and moral relation. Her Vietnam-era poems are therefore read not only as poems of protest but also as formal investigations into the ethical life of public language. They test whether poetic form can sustain recognition, conscience, and responsibility under historical conditions in which official discourse has been degraded by euphemism, abstraction, procedural rationalization, and semantic inversion.

This ethical understanding of poetic language also needs to be situated within the broader field of postwar American poetics. Levertov's work is shaped by the formal inheritance of Black Mountain and projective verse, especially Charles Olson's account of the poem as an open field in which form emerges from breath, perception, and movement

rather than from inherited metrical closure (Olson [1950] 1997, pp. 239–49; Epstein 2022, pp. 28–42). Levertov’s own theory of “organic form” adapts this lineage by defining poetic making as a process of apperception, a way of recognizing the order latent in what is perceived (Levertov 1965, pp. 420–25).¹ In this context, lineation, syntax, and cadence are not merely aesthetic devices but modes of registering relation: the poem becomes a field in which perception is tested, corrected, and made answerable. At the same time, Levertov’s Vietnam-era poetry revises this postwar emphasis on open form by pressing it toward public witness. Her exchanges with Robert Duncan are especially revealing here, since they expose a central tension in postwar poetics between poetry as exploratory, processual attention and poetry as explicit moral intervention (Bertholf and Gelpi 2004; Gelpi and Bertholf 2006). Levertov does not simply abandon the experimental inheritance of postwar American poetry for political statement; rather, she transforms that inheritance into a poetics of ethical perception, in which fractured syntax, documentary quotation, apostrophe, and bodily image become ways of resisting the abstracting languages of war, law, and bureaucracy.

The argument also draws on Hannah Arendt’s account of bureaucratic language and moral thoughtlessness in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt 1964). Arendt’s analysis is useful here because it shows that ethical collapse is not always accompanied by explicit hatred, ideological excess, or spectacular violence. It may also take the form of cliché, procedural fluency, obedience, and the refusal to think from the standpoint of another person. This helps explain why Levertov treats administrative speech not as a merely stylistic failure but as a moral danger. In her poetry, degraded language is dangerous because it weakens the relation between speech and judgment: it allows speakers to act, obey, justify, or acquiesce without fully confronting the human meaning of what is being said or done.

Critical discourse analysis, especially Norman Fairclough’s work on the relation between textual form and institutional power, provides the methodological bridge between Levertov’s poetic practice and the public languages she contests (Fairclough 1995). Fairclough’s approach makes it possible to read discourse not only as content but also as social action: as a set of textual choices through which authority is naturalized, responsibility is displaced, and political reality is organized. In this article, however, critical discourse analysis is adapted to a literary-critical purpose. It supports close attention to diction, quotation, syntax, repetition, lineation, juxtaposition, apostrophe, and documentary insertion as formal means through which Levertov exposes the ideological work of legal, military, and bureaucratic language.

The method of the article is therefore literary rather than sociolinguistic in a narrow sense. It does not offer a corpus-based analysis of political speech, nor does it attempt a comprehensive history of Vietnam-era rhetoric. Instead, it proceeds through close readings of three central poems—“During the Eichmann Trial,” “Life at War,” and “Prologue: An Interim”—placing them in relation to the specific historical discourses they quote, echo, or resist: legal testimony, military communiqué, bureaucratic justification, antiwar protest, and counter-speech. Contemporary political discourse appears only as a limited concluding coda, not as a second object of study. Its function is to clarify the continuing relevance, but also the historical limits, of Levertov’s Vietnam-era poetics of linguistic vigilance.

The article uses “truth” in a limited, twofold sense. At the level of public discourse, truth names the accountability of political statements to shared evidence, material consequence, and identifiable agency. This is not a naïve claim that language transparently mirrors reality; rather, it is a democratic minimum. Public language must remain answerable to what has happened, who has acted, and who has suffered. At the level of poetry, truth is mediated rather than simply reported. Levertov does not imagine poetic language as direct access to reality; she treats it as a mode of disciplined attention through which

reality becomes ethically apprehensible. The tension between public accountability and poetic mediation is central to her poetics: poetry cannot bypass language in order to reach truth, but it can reveal when official language has insulated words from evidence, bodies, and moral consequence.

3. “Corpselike Obedience”: Language, Power, and Counter-Discourse in Levertov’s “During the Eichmann Trial”

Denise Levertov’s “During the Eichmann Trial,” included in *The Jacob’s Ladder* (Levertov 1961) and often regarded as her first explicitly political poem, marks a decisive turning point in her poetic and ethical trajectory. This section examines ethical perception: Levertov’s attempt to restore the relation between number, face, and moral recognition. Here, imagination begins to function as an ethical faculty, and poetry assumes the role of counter-discourse. Counter-discourse, as the term is used here, does not mean the production of an alternative slogan or an opposing ideological statement. It refers instead to a poetic mode that exposes the hidden operations of official language: its abstractions, evasions, substitutions, and failures of reference. Levertov’s counter-discourse works by returning institutional speech to the bodies and histories it has attempted to erase.

The 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann—with its chilling accounts of “corpselike obedience” (Levertov 1983, pp. 63–64)—exposed for Levertov the moral vacuity of bureaucratic language and the complicities it both enables and obscures. Her response is inflected by a complex spiritual inheritance: as the daughter of a Hasidic Jew who converted to Christianity, she developed a dual consciousness of faith and displacement that sharpened her sensitivity to the fissures within language itself. This layered identity intensifies her engagement with questions of guilt, witnessing, and the redemptive potential of speech. In “During the Eichmann Trial,” these concerns coalesce into a poetics of attention, where the act of “looking up”—a formulation she borrowed from fellow poet Robert Duncan—becomes a means of restoring vision and ethical relation in defiance of the blindness produced by obedience.

The sequence exposes how Eichmann’s inability to perceive the individuality of Hitler’s victims mirrors a larger moral and linguistic complicity: the free world, too, had allowed its language to collapse into the rhetoric of enumeration. What was lost, Levertov implies, was not only the lives of millions but the very grammar of empathy—the words and gestures that make human recognition possible.

The Jerusalem courtroom, as Hannah Arendt described it in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, was itself a theater of paradox, where the machinery of justice coexisted with the moral opacity of the accused. Arendt dwells on the eerie spectacle of Eichmann enclosed in a glass booth, speaking through mechanical mediation—both present and absent, human yet spectral. She writes:

Nothing the accused said, in the curiously disembodied voice that came out of the tape-recorder—doubly disembodied, because the body that owned the voice was present but itself also appeared strangely disembodied through the thick glass walls surrounding it—was denied either by him or by the defense. (Arendt 1964, p. 90)

This haunting image of disembodiment, Arendt suggests, reveals that Eichmann’s moral failure was not demonic passion but a void of inner life—a condition mirrored in his mechanical speech and sealed isolation. For Levertov, this spectacle of estranged language exposed the ethical stakes of discourse itself: the distance between words and empathy, between obedience and thought. Levertov’s poem translates Arendt’s philosophical insight into poetic syntax. The opening lines of “During the Eichmann Trial” expose the lethal banality of language that has ceased to signify human feeling:

'I was used from the nursery
to obedience

all my life . . .
Corpselike

obedience.' [...]. (Levertov 1983, pp. 63–64)

Through fragmentation and repetition, Levertov recontextualizes Eichmann's own language so that it begins to indict itself. The repeated invocation of "obedience" no longer functions as justification but as a hollow refrain—a linguistic corpse whose emptiness becomes increasingly audible with each iteration. Form and argument converge: the poem's fractured structure enacts the breakdown of institutional discourse once it is severed from moral imagination, reducing authoritative speech to echo and paralysis rather than coherence or meaning.

The force of "Corpselike/obedience" depends on the line break. "Corpselike" hangs momentarily without its noun, forcing the reader to inhabit the gap between body and command before "obedience" completes the phrase. The break turns Eichmann's defense into a miniature corpse: a phrase emptied of agency, movement, and inwardness. Levertov does not merely quote bureaucratic obedience; she breaks it open formally, allowing its ethical deadness to become audible.

Critics have identified "During the Eichmann Trial" as a pivotal moment in Denise Levertov's evolving poetics, one that offers a crucial framework for understanding the ethical stakes of language in contemporary political discourse. As Dana Greene observes, the poem marks a decisive reconfiguration of imagination—from a Romantic faculty that "seizes as beauty what must be truth" to an ethical capacity grounded in empathy and shared responsibility (Greene 2012, p. 64). This shift displaces aesthetic contemplation in favor of moral engagement, situating imagination as a prerequisite for ethical recognition rather than a vehicle of transcendence.

Within this framework, the poem's imperative—"Count them./Who are five million?"—recasts enumeration itself as an act of moral recognition. Against the bureaucratic logic that reduces human beings to statistical abstraction, counting becomes an ethical intervention. What appears as a numerical gesture is transformed into a demand to restore singularity and presence, resisting the depersonalizing mechanisms through which violence is rendered administratively intelligible. In this sense, enumeration ceases to be neutral; it becomes a site of ethical struggle.

Levertov's poetic practice explicitly reframes evil, converging with Lorrie Smith's claim that the poem presents it not as an excess of monstrous will but as "a failure of imagination" (Smith 1993, p. 179). In this formulation, ethical collapse is not located in radical otherness but in an inability—or refusal—to perceive others as fully human. The Trump-era normalization of dehumanizing rhetoric, particularly in references to migrants as "animals" or "invaders," exemplifies this failure: a breakdown in the imaginative capacity required for ethical recognition (McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton 2020; Hodges 2019; Zhu 2024).

This ethical reorientation is further articulated in Levertov's prose reflections. In "Origins of a Poem," she defines imagination as "the only way to recognition," positioning it as the generative condition of compassion rather than its ornament (Levertov 1973, p. 45). Imagination, in this sense, is not supplementary but constitutive of ethical perception. The erosion of imagination, therefore, entails not merely a rhetorical shift but a transformation in the conditions under which moral judgment becomes possible.

The poem extends this insight into the domain of perception itself. As Donna Hollenberg notes, Eichmann's nostalgic evocations of "yellow" remain dissociated from the yellow Star of David, revealing a profound perceptual and moral disjunction (Hollenberg 2013,

p. 194). This failure of association exemplifies a broader cognitive rupture: the inability to connect signifier and referent, symbol and suffering.

It was the yellow
of the stars too,

stars that marked
those in whose faces

you had not
looked. (Levertov 1983, p. 64)

Levertov foregrounds this perceptual breakdown to demonstrate how distortion at the level of vision mirrors an erosion of conscience. In this framework, the inability to see truly becomes inseparable from the inability to judge ethically. Read in relation to contemporary political discourse, this insight underscores how the manipulation of language—through euphemism, abstraction, and semantic drift—produces not only misinformation but ethical impairment. The Trump era, in this respect, can be understood not merely as a crisis of truth but as a crisis of imagination: a systematic weakening of the cognitive and affective capacities required to recognize the humanity of others.

In Levertov's poem on the Eichmann trial, color becomes discourse: a contested sign that reveals moral failure when stripped of context. By restoring its ethical resonance, Levertov demonstrates how poetry can reanimate language from the ruins of bureaucratic speech. Her counter-discourse transforms signs of erasure into instruments of testimony. The poem culminates in an appeal to perception as the ground of responsibility:

He had not looked,
pitiful man whom none
pity, whom all
must pity if they look
into their own face (given
only by glass, steel, water
barely known) all
who look up
to see—how many
faces? How many
seen in a lifetime? (Not those
that flash by, but those
into which the gaze wanders
and is lost
and returns to tell
Here is a mystery,

**a person, an
other, an I?**

Count them.
Who are five million?). (Levertov 1983, p. 63)

Levertov's use of the verb *look* underscores that ethical awareness begins in the gaze—an act of attentiveness that bureaucratic discourse suppresses. This motif of sight as moral awakening parallels Arendt's concern with the "thoughtlessness" of Eichmann's speech: both identify the failure to see and imagine as the origin of evil. Levertov's central claim is not merely that Eichmann obeyed, but that obedience was rendered sayable—and

thus inhabitable—through a bureaucratic idiom that systematically erodes recognition. What the poem exposes is a linguistic precondition for moral collapse: a register in which human beings are translated into administrative units and ethical response is displaced by procedural fluency. Against this, Levertov redefines imagination as a civic faculty—the capacity to perceive a person where administration perceives a datum. The poem’s decisive turn from the inert refrain of “corpselike/obedience” to the injunction “Count them./Who are five million?” stages this shift with particular force. Counting ceases to be a neutral operation and becomes instead an act of ethical reattachment, binding number back to face and speech back to moral agency. In this formulation, the degradation of language is inseparable from the erosion of empathy: once words harden into procedural formulas, judgment is suspended and responsibility diffused. The repeated interrogatives—“How many/faces? How many/seen in a lifetime?”—slow the poem into an ethics of attention. Their syntax resists the administrative speed of mass enumeration. The poem asks the reader not to count efficiently, but to experience the impossibility of counting without reducing persons to numbers.

4. Breathing Together: The Trial of Conscience and the Language of Resistance During the Boston Five Trial

The ethical and linguistic crisis that Levertov anatomizes in “During the Eichmann Trial” does not remain confined to the historical figure of Eichmann or to the abstract problem of bureaucratic obedience. Rather, it anticipates a broader confrontation between competing vocabularies of responsibility that would soon unfold within the American context of the Vietnam War. If Eichmann’s language exemplifies the extreme endpoint of administrative speech severed from moral recognition, the late 1960s reveal how similar tensions emerge within democratic institutions themselves, where legality and conscience come into open conflict. The question Levertov poses—whether language can still sustain ethical perception—thus reappears in a new register: not in the testimony of a Nazi official, but in the courtroom where American citizens are prosecuted for refusing to participate in state violence. In this sense, the Boston Five trial can be read as the juridical continuation of the problem Levertov identifies, a moment in which the struggle over obedience, responsibility, and the meaning of dissent is no longer poetic or philosophical alone but embedded in the very language of the law.

As the antiwar movement expanded beyond student protests into a wider coalition of clergy, intellectuals, and cultural figures, the government responded by reframing the movement’s moral language as a threat to national order. Historians of the period have noted that this strategy relied heavily on the elasticity of conspiracy law, which allowed prosecutors to treat ordinary forms of political expression—meetings, public statements, and symbolic acts of protest—as elements of a coordinated plot against the state. In practice, this juridical framework blurred the distinction between democratic participation and criminal subversion. The momentum generated by the October 1967 demonstrations and the symbolic return of draft cards culminated in one of the most revealing confrontations between law, language, and moral agency in the Vietnam era: the Boston Five trial. On 5 January 1968, a federal grand jury indicted five prominent figures—Dr. Benjamin Spock, Reverend William Sloane Coffin Jr., Marcus Raskin, Michael Ferber, and Mitchell Goodman, who was also Levertov’s husband—on charges of “conspiracy to counsel, aid, and abet violations of the Selective Service law and to hinder administration of the draft.”

The stature of the defendants transformed the case into a national spectacle. For many activists, it represented not merely a criminal prosecution but a referendum on conscience—a struggle over whether moral dissent could still be expressed in the language of law. The government, however, reframed the event discursively, deploying conspiracy

law as a linguistic and juridical instrument to narrow the terms of debate. As Jessica Mitford observed, this strategy allowed prosecutors to treat intentions and speech acts—“meetings, speeches, published statements” (Mitford 1970, p. 62)—as evidence of criminal collusion. The courtroom thus became an arena in which political language itself was placed on trial.

The judge’s opening remarks epitomized this distortion of meaning: conspiracy, he explained, could mean simply “going on a parallel course,” or even “breathing together—con, together; spiring, breathing; con-spiring” (Bloom 1972, p. 315). In this semantic sleight of hand, dissent became conspiracy, and moral solidarity, criminal coordination. Through legal language, “breathing together”—a metaphor for collective witness—was recast as evidence of subversion.

Inside the courtroom, Goodman dismantled the prosecution’s rhetoric with quiet irony, testifying that the defendants were “very inefficient, rank amateurs, and hardly the people to plot a nationwide conspiracy” (Bloom 1972, p. 315). His remark exposed the absurdity of treating symbolic protest as organized rebellion. Dr. Spock, by contrast, raised the discussion to an explicitly ethical plane:

I felt our defense at the trial should be based on the Nuremberg Principles [. . .] If we could put Germans in prison and put them to death for obeying orders to commit war crimes, certainly that means American young men should be able to refuse to participate in similar crimes. (Spock 1989, pp. 96–97)

The defendants understood the trial in precisely these terms. Their legal strategy attempted to reclaim the moral vocabulary that the prosecution had displaced. By invoking the Nuremberg Principles, Benjamin Spock and his co-defendants insisted that obedience to unjust laws could itself constitute a moral failure. The courtroom thus became a space in which two incompatible languages confronted one another: the administrative language of state authority and the ethical language of conscience. Spock’s invocation of Nuremberg reasserted the bond between legality and humanity, revealing a judiciary incapable of articulating justice in ethical terms. Judge Francis J. W. Ford’s rejection of such reasoning embodied what Levertov saw as the collapse of civic language under bureaucratic rationality—the substitution of legality for conscience.

Outside the courtroom, the trial became a theater of counter-discourse. Vigils, readings, and rallies reframed it as a public dialogue on moral responsibility. At New York’s Town Hall, a crowd of 1500—including Norman Mailer, Robert Lowell, and Susan Sontag—signed a scroll pledging to “counsel, aid and abet” draft resisters. Poetry readings by Allen Ginsberg and Denise Levertov transformed the language of accusation into a poetics of solidarity and conscience. In this context, poetry functioned not as ornament or accompaniment but as discursive resistance—a mode of truth-telling denied in the courtroom yet vital in the public sphere. The poetic word, reactivated against bureaucratic abstraction, restored what the legal word had suppressed: the capacity of language to bear moral witness.

On 10 July 1968, Reverend William Sloane Coffin Jr., Michael Ferber, Mitchell Goodman, and Dr. Benjamin Spock were each sentenced to two years in prison and fined \$5000 (Ferber’s fine was later reduced). The defense announced plans to appeal, and all four were released on personal recognizance with \$1000 bonds. Legal costs were largely met through contributions from peace organizations, supporters, and professional fundraisers. Following the sentencing, more than one hundred demonstrators who had been picketing outside the courthouse joined the defendants in leading a march of approximately 7000 people to Boston Common, where they held a press conference. For Goodman, the event yielded a paradoxical notoriety: though he had long struggled for literary recognition, he now found himself labeled “a criminal and a traitor in the U.S. Federal Court in Boston.”

The intersection of literary testimony, mass protest, and legal confrontation during the Vietnam War has increasingly been understood by scholars as a crucial site in the

cultural history of American dissent. Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* (1968) remains one of the most influential literary representations of this moment. In his hybrid narrative of the October 1967 March on the Pentagon, Mailer frames the demonstration as a form of symbolic confrontation between citizens and the institutional authority of the state. Reflecting on the unprecedented nature of the protest, he asks whether "fifty or a hundred thousand civilians" had ever before assembled "for a purpose remotely like this: a symbolic battle which might have real broken heads" (Mailer 1968, p. 114). Mailer's famous formulation of the book as "History as a Novel/The Novel as History" situates the event within a narrative framework that blurs the boundaries between reportage, historical reflection, and literary interpretation. Scholars of Vietnam-era protest culture have frequently interpreted this narrative strategy as indicative of a broader transformation in the political imagination of the late 1960s, when writers and intellectuals increasingly conceived of dissent not only as political action but also as a performative and narrative practice through which citizens sought to reassert moral authority against the bureaucratic language of the national security state (Gitlin 1987, pp. 208–12; Kazin 2011, pp. 191–95).

Denise Levertov's Vietnam-era poetry articulates a complementary literary response to this historical moment. As Audrey T. Rodgers suggests, "Life at War," Levertov's first fully explicit poetic confrontation with the Vietnam War, marks the beginning of a broader sequence of poems in which her response to the conflict expands outward from long-standing moral unease into direct political articulation (Rodgers 1993, p. 81). Within this context, the poem intensifies Levertov's ethical critique by locating the consequences of modern warfare not only in physical destruction but also in the corrosion of imaginative and moral life. First published in *The Sorrow Dance* (Levertov 1967), it marks a decisive moment in her antiwar poetics, as she confronts Vietnam directly and insists on the inescapable presence of violence within everyday consciousness.

The poem's juxtaposition of sensuous human capacity with scenes of extreme bodily destruction produces a deliberate ethical shock, exposing the contradiction between humanist self-conceptions and the normalized violence of modern warfare.

delicate Man, whose flesh
 responds to a caress, whose eyes
 are flowers that perceive the stars,

 whose music excels the music of birds,
 whose laughter matches the laughter of dogs,
 whose understanding manifests designs
 fairer than the spider's most intricate web,
 still turns without surprise, with mere regret
 to the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk
 runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies,
 transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp-fragments,
 implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gulleys.
 We are the humans, men who can make;
 whose language imagines *mercy*,
lovingkindness; we have believed one another
 mirrored forms of a God we felt as good—

 who do these acts, who convince ourselves
 it is necessary; these acts are done
 to our own flesh; burned human flesh
 is smelling in Viet Nam as I write. (Levertov 1983, pp. 229–30)

The poem's opening catalogue is governed by anaphora: "whose flesh," "whose eyes," "whose music," "whose laughter," "whose understanding." This repeated structure builds a humanist anthropology before the sentence turns violently against itself. The same grammatical subject that possesses beauty, music, laughter, and understanding also "turns without surprise" toward atrocity. The ethical shock lies not only in the images but also in the syntax: Levertov refuses to create a new subject for violence. The maker of culture and the maker of war remain grammatically continuous.

The passage powerfully substantiates the critical claim that Levertov engineers an "ethical shock" through radical juxtaposition, but it does so with a precision that goes beyond mere contrast into structural indictment. The opening catalogue—"delicate Man . . . whose eyes/are flowers. . . whose music excels the music of birds"—accumulates a vision of human refinement grounded in sensuous perception, aesthetic creation, and imaginative intelligence. This elevated anthropological portrait, however, is violently ruptured by the abrupt descent into images of mechanized atrocity: "the scheduled breaking open of breasts," "entrails of still-alive babies," "pulp-fragments," "carcass-gulleys." The shock derives not only from the graphic nature of these images but also from their grammatical and conceptual continuity with the preceding lines: the same subject—"Man"—persists across both registers. In this way, Levertov refuses any consoling separation between the humanist ideal and the agent of violence; instead, she exposes their co-implication. The phrase "without surprise, with mere regret" is especially devastating, as it signals not an aberration but a habituated moral numbness, aligning with the broader argument that modern warfare depends upon the normalization of violence at the level of perception. The poem's shift to the collective "We are the humans" further intensifies this critique, collapsing distance between perpetrator, witness, and reader and implicating all within the same ethical economy. Crucially, the line "whose language imagines mercy" foregrounds language itself as a site of contradiction: the same linguistic capacity that produces ideals of "lovingkindness" also sustains the justificatory frameworks—"we convince ourselves/it is necessary"—that enable destruction. Thus, the passage not only exemplifies the ethical shock critics describe but deepens it, revealing that the crisis is not simply one of violent action but of a fractured human consciousness in which imagination, language, and morality have been co-opted into the logic of war.

Recent Levertov scholarship helps clarify why this bodily insistence is central to the poem's language ethics. Lisa Narbeshuber's reading of Levertov's Vietnam-era poetry places war, flesh, and otherness at the center of Levertov's poetic project, showing that the encounter with bodily vulnerability is not incidental to her antiwar writing but constitutive of its ethical force (Narbeshuber 2006, pp. 131–48). "Life at War" should therefore not be read as a poem that merely adds graphic imagery to political protest. Its bodily images perform a specific ethical function: they undo the distance on which military abstraction depends. By forcing language back into relation with wounded, burned, and exposed flesh, Levertov resists the discursive processes through which war is made clean, procedural, and conceptually manageable.

Elisa Ortiz Barroso's work on Levertov's Vietnam poetry further sharpens this point by emphasizing the position of the American spectator who encounters the war from the domestic space of the living room (Ortiz Barroso 2016, pp. 209–18). In that context, Levertov's poetry challenges the passivity produced by mediation, distance, and spectatorship. "Life at War" collapses the gap between the distant battlefield and the domestic consciousness that consumes images of war. The poem's claim that "the imagination" is "filmed over" by war is therefore both ethical and medial: violence enters not only public policy but also perception itself. Read through Narbeshuber and Ortiz Barroso, Levertov's poem

becomes a critique of the conditions under which suffering is seen, mediated, absorbed, and linguistically neutralized.

Rather than isolating war as a distant geopolitical event, the poem internalizes it, suggesting that “we have breathed the grits of it in, all our lives,” so that even “the imagination/[is] filmed over with the gray filth of it” (Levertov 1983, p. 229). In this formulation, war does not merely produce suffering; it alters perception itself, dulling the ethical responsiveness that underpins human recognition. The poem’s stark juxtaposition between humanity’s creative capacities—“whose language imagines mercy”—and its participation in atrocity underscores a profound contradiction at the heart of modern subjectivity. As critics have noted, Levertov’s strategy is to counter the abstraction of military discourse by restoring attention to the embodied and sensory realities of violence, thereby reactivating the imaginative faculty as a site of ethical resistance. In this sense, “Life at War” complements Mailer’s narrative of collective protest by exposing the internal moral crisis that renders such dissent necessary: a crisis in which the erosion of imagination becomes inseparable from the normalization of violence.

The Boston Five trial of 1968 can be understood as the juridical continuation of the tensions articulated in both Mailer’s narrative and Levertov’s poetry. The federal prosecution of the defendants for allegedly conspiring to aid draft resistance translated the symbolic politics of the antiwar movement into the language of criminal law. Historians of the Vietnam era have often interpreted the trial as a moment when the moral claims advanced by protest culture were tested within the institutional framework of the American state (DeBenedetti and Chatfield 1990, pp. 215–18). The defendants themselves framed their actions in explicitly ethical terms, arguing that opposition to the war constituted an obligation of conscience rather than an act of conspiracy. In this sense, the courtroom drama of the Boston Five trial extended the cultural struggle that Mailer had described on the streets of Washington and that Levertov articulated in poetic form. Together, these texts and events reveal how literature, activism, and law intersected during the late 1960s to produce a powerful reconfiguration of the relationship between citizenship, conscience, and dissent in modern American political culture.

5. “Prologue: An Interim”: Semantic Inversion and Counter-Discourse

If the Boston Five trial renders visible the state’s attempt to regulate dissent through the language of law, “Prologue: An Interim” reveals how that same regulatory logic permeates the fabric of everyday life. As Levertov notes, the poem was composed while her husband, Mitchell Goodman, and the four other defendants awaited trial and is therefore inseparable from the immediate pressures of indictment, delay, and uncertainty. Yet what the poem registers is not the spectacle of the courtroom but its afterlife in ordinary speech: the subtle normalization of distortion, the quiet accommodation of contradiction, the creeping sense that language itself has become unreliable. In this transition, Levertov moves from the juridical drama of “breathing together” redefined as conspiracy to a more intimate diagnosis of how meaning is undone at the level of daily exchange. The stakes remain the same—recognition, responsibility, moral agency—but the site of struggle expands, suggesting that the crisis of language exposed in Boston is not episodic but systemic, embedded in the very conditions under which speech is produced and understood. This section turns to counter-discourse, showing how Levertov quotes and reframes official language in order to expose its semantic violence.

What the Boston Five trial stages publicly as a conflict between legality and conscience, “Prologue: An Interim” absorbs and rearticulates at the level of lived experience. The poem does not abandon the political; rather, it translates the external drama of accusation and defense into an interior register where the pressures of history are felt as fatigue, vigilance,

and moral insistence. In doing so, Levertov reveals that the crisis of language is not confined to institutions but extends into the conditions of poetic making itself, shaping both the form and the emotional economy of her work. In a letter to Larry Eigner dated 17 August 1968, Levertov described feeling “exhausted because when one concentrates on one single thing that way one’s inner life goes to hell and one’s imagination aches from disuse,” a remark that illuminates the tension between moral engagement and creative vitality in this period.² Yet even in fatigue, Levertov refused to withdraw from the ethical imperatives of her time. Her correspondence reveals deep admiration for young draft resisters such as Chuck Matthei and De Courcay Squire, whose hunger strike she invoked in “Prologue: An Interim.” In the author’s preface to her 1971 volume *To Stay Alive*, Levertov explicitly linked poetic creation to moral witness:

In “Prologue: An Interim” some of my heroes—that is, those who stand for integrity, honesty, love of life—are draft resisters who go to jail in testimony of their refusal to take part in carnage. In the same poem I invoked the self-immolators—Vietnamese and American—not as models but as flares to keep us moving in the dark. (Levertov 1987, p. 106)

By incorporating these voices of witness and sacrifice, Levertov expands the lyric into a communal discourse of resistance, transforming poetry into an archive of conscience. It is precisely at this hinge—between the juridical theater of Boston and the interior strain of witness—that “Prologue: An Interim” finds its bearings. The poem confronts the instrumentalization of language orchestrated by American presidents, generals, and media spokesmen during the Vietnam War. What Levertov exposes is not merely factual distortion but a systemic rhetoric of inversion—a mode of speech that erases contradiction through its own paradoxical syntax. Language itself becomes a battlefield, its moral referents stripped and reassigned to justify state violence.

“Prologue: An Interim”

i

While the war drags on, always worse,
the soul dwindles sometimes to an ant
rapid upon a cracked surface;
lightly, grimly, incessantly
it skims the unfathomed clefts where despair
seethes hot and black.

ii

Children in the laundromat
waiting while their mothers fold sheets.
A five-year-old boy addresses
a four-year-old girl. “When I say
Do you want some gum? say yes.”
“Yes. . .” “Wait!—Now:
‘Yes!’ ‘Well yes means no,
so you can’t have any.’”
He chews. He pops a big, delicate bubble at her.

And,

“‘It became necessary
to destroy the town to save it,’
a United States major said today.
He was talking about the decision

by allied commanders to bomb and shell the town
regardless of civilian casualties,
to rout the Vietcong". (Levertov 1987, p. 129)

By setting the child's semantic game against the military communiqué of a U.S. officer justifying the destruction of a Mekong Delta village during the Tet Offensive, Levertov constructs one of the most chilling juxtapositions in twentieth-century war poetry. The boy's manipulation of *yes* and *no* as meaningless counters for gum parallels the officer's use of *destroy* and *save* as bureaucratic euphemisms. In both exchanges, words are emptied of ethical substance—reduced to tokens in a hierarchy of control. What begins as innocent play thus becomes a microcosm of linguistic corruption: language itself has become detached from moral reference. The child's "big, delicate bubble" mirrors the major's rhetoric—momentarily inflated, then bursting into silence. Through this devastating parallel, Levertov dramatizes how authoritarian discourse reproduces itself at every register, from the playground to the Pentagon.

The poem's power depends on parataxis. Levertov does not explain the analogy between the child's semantic trick and the military communiqué; she places them side by side and lets the reader experience the shock of recognition. The child's game empties "yes" and "no" of stable meaning; the major's statement performs the same operation on "destroy" and "save." The poem therefore stages semantic inversion before interpreting it.

"Prologue: An Interim" therefore enacts a poetics of counter-speech: a struggle to reclaim the integrity of words from their political contamination. By juxtaposing intimacy and atrocity, childish syntax and state propaganda, Levertov exposes how language—once the medium of conscience—can be twisted into an instrument of domination. Her poetic intervention does not restore innocence but insists on awareness: that to "stay alive," as her 1971 title proclaims, is to sustain vigilance over the words by which life and death are named.

In her prose reflections from the same period, she affirmed the maxim—attributed to Robert Duncan—that "language is not a set of counters to be manipulated but a Power" (Levertov 1973, p. 54). The poem enacts precisely this conviction: it holds a mirror to the degradation of public speech while reasserting poetry as a site where words might resist commodification and recover ethical resonance. Levertov expands the poem's moral reach by incorporating the voices of those whose resistance carried real bodily risk—among them Antioch student De Courcsey Squire, arrested during an antiwar protest and later imprisoned for contempt of court. During her incarceration, Squire undertook a hunger strike that nearly claimed her life. Levertov includes a fragment from a news report chronicling her ordeal:

*On January 29th, the 53rd day of her fast,
Miss Squire was removed to a hospital.
All the doctors would do was inform her that
the fast may cause her permanent brain injury.* (Levertov 1987, p. 134)

By embedding this journalistic excerpt within the poem, Levertov reframes reportage as an act of poetic witnessing. The clipped, impersonal diction of the news report—its bureaucratic tone and reliance on passive constructions—mirrors the institutional language through which political violence is often rendered administratively neutral. Removed from its original context and placed within the moral architecture of the poem, however, the fragment acquires a different resonance. The apparent neutrality of the report becomes itself an object of critique, exposing how the language of official documentation can efface the human stakes of dissent. Levertov's poetic framing restores precisely what such discourse suppresses: the vulnerability of the body and the ethical gravity of resistance.

In this way, the poem does more than memorialize Squire's ordeal. It demonstrates how poetry can intervene in the circulation of public language, interrupting its bureaucratic abstraction and re-inscribing the lived reality of suffering and courage into the record of the Vietnam-era struggle.

Levertov's critique of the political corruption of words reaches its most profound articulation in the repeated apostrophes to language interspersed throughout section II of "Prologue: An Interim." In these invocations, language ceases to be a neutral medium; it becomes an entity at once agentive and vulnerable, both shaping and suffering the consequences of history. By speaking directly to language, Levertov dramatizes its dual role as the vessel of human thought and the victim of political distortion. The erosion of linguistic integrity mirrors, for her, the moral and cultural disintegration brought about by war:

O language, virtue
of man, touchstone
worn down by what
gross friction . . . (Levertov 1987, p. 129)

[. . .]
O, language, mother of thought,
are you rejecting us as we reject you?
Language, coral island
accrued from human comprehensions,
human dreams,
you are eroded as war erodes us. (Levertov 1987, p. 130)

Language here is figured as both elegiac and accusatory: a "touchstone" of moral discernment worn down by the "gross friction" of political deceit. In likening language to a "coral island," Levertov underscores its collective and temporal dimension—its slow accretion through generations of human imagination and comprehension, now threatened with dissolution by ideological corrosion. Her apostrophe to language extends beyond lamentation. It constitutes a poetics of ethical interdependence, suggesting that when language is degraded, the capacity for moral judgment itself collapses. In her October–November 1971 letter to Robert Duncan, Levertov explicitly resisted his suggestion that these lines implied "an eroded way of looking at language." On the contrary, she insisted that the image of language as a "coral island" affirmed language as the cumulative form through which human beings "get hold" of their understandings and dreams, hence her related phrase, "Language, mother of thought." For Levertov, "actual thinking could not be done until there were words to do it in" (Bertholf and Gelpi 2004, p. 684).

The exchange with Robert Duncan is crucial because it situates Levertov's language ethics within postwar American poetics rather than only within political history. Duncan and Levertov shared a commitment to poetry as a field of perception, but Vietnam sharpened a major divergence between them. Duncan objected not simply to Levertov's politics but to what he perceived as the reduction of poetic imagination to moral opposition. His formulation of the issue is stark: "the poet's role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it" (Bertholf and Gelpi 2004, p. 669). Levertov's reply, however, refused the premise that political urgency necessarily compromised poetic form. Reasserting her organic poetics against Duncan's more autonomous conception of the poem, she insisted that "Form is never more than the REVELATION (not extension) of content" (Bertholf and Gelpi 2004, p. 680). Their disagreement was therefore not simply personal or ideological; it concerned the status of poetic language itself. Could poetry remain faithful to imagination while confronting war directly? Could public witness coexist with formal freedom? Levertov's

Vietnam poems answer by making formal attention itself the vehicle of witness: quotation, line break, apostrophe, and fragmentation become ways of resisting the reduction of language to political “counters.”

For Levertov, then, language is not an instrument or ornament but the very condition of consciousness. Like a coral reef formed through the life processes of countless organisms, it represents the cumulative inheritance of human experience—an accretion of meanings, memories, and moral distinctions. The destruction of this linguistic ecology signals a broader cultural catastrophe. As Wittgenstein famously observed, “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein 1922, 5.6). Levertov’s vision accords with this observation: when language itself is diminished, the scope of moral and perceptual reality contracts in equal measure.

If language embodies cultural morality, then its erosion through propaganda signals not simply a crisis of communication but the destabilization of moral order itself. The “moral touchstone,” once shaped through humanity’s discernment between good and evil, is ultimately supplanted by arbitrariness. In this condition, distinctions between truth and falsehood, good and evil, are blurred, rendering citizens susceptible to manipulation by those who weaponize language to control perception.

This manipulation reached its height in the rhetoric used to justify U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia. Ideological victory demanded not only military force but discursive control—the crafting of narratives that reframed the war for domestic acceptance. The “domino effect,” which predicted a worldwide collapse of democracy should Vietnam fall to communism, epitomized this logic: an implausible metaphor elevated into policy, demonstrating how corrupted language can serve coercion rather than communion.

As Audrey T. Rodgers observes in *Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Engagement*, most Americans entered the Vietnam era ill-informed, sustained by myths of invincibility, and only gradually awakened by televised violence and protest. The war’s atrocities, from napalm to Agent Orange, reached the public consciousness belatedly—proof that “waking sleepers” was itself a moral task (Rodgers 1993, p. 29).

Levertov’s wager, then, is that the survival of ethical life depends on whether a public can still *hear* the difference between naming and laundering—between words that register harm and those that wash it clean into necessity. The poem’s opening domestic scene is tellingly, almost wryly literal: children waiting in a laundromat, watching language itself become a rigged game in which “yes” is made to mean “no” and desire is turned into a lesson in power. That setting is not incidental décor but an emblem: as clothes are churned and rinsed, so is public speech—until coercion reads as care and destruction can be uttered as rescue. The double scene she constructs in the poem (the child’s semantic trap and the major’s “destroy . . . to save”) is therefore not only an indictment of Vietnam-era doublespeak; it is a portable diagnostic for any regime in which language is engineered to launder domination into “common sense.”

6. Levertov’s Language Ethics After Vietnam

The relation between Levertov’s Vietnam-era poetics and contemporary political discourse is not one of simple recurrence. The historical conditions are different. Vietnam-era official language was shaped by Cold War containment, technocratic management, military bureaucracy, and the rhetoric of necessity: “pacification,” “body counts,” “free-fire zones,” “credibility,” and the infamous logic of destroying in order to save. Recent U.S. political discourse, by contrast, has often operated less through bureaucratic coherence than through spectacle, repetition, evidential instability, affective polarization, plausible deniability, and platform circulation. Yet the ethical problem Levertov identified persists in altered form:

public language can still detach action from suffering, agency from consequence, and responsibility from harm.

This is why Levertov's poetry remains a powerful model of linguistic vigilance. "During the Eichmann Trial" restores number to face and obedience to judgment. "Life at War" forces military abstraction back into contact with wounded and burned flesh. "Prologue: An Interim" exposes the semantic violence by which destruction can be made to speak as rescue. Across these poems, Levertov does not merely denounce war; she examines the linguistic conditions under which violence becomes administrable, narratable, and morally tolerable. Her work therefore teaches readers to ask what a phrase conceals, whose body disappears behind abstraction, what agency is displaced by procedure, and how poetic form can reactivate moral perception where official discourse has dulled it.

Contemporary scholarship on Trump-era discourse helps clarify the afterlife of this problem without displacing Levertov from the center of the argument. Janet McIntosh and Norma Mendoza-Denton describe the Trump era as a "linguistic emergency," a formulation that resonates with Levertov's sense that political crisis is also a crisis in the ethical function of words (McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton 2020, p. 18). Adam Hodges similarly characterizes Trumpian discourse as a "hostile regime of language," one structured by repetition, spectacle, strategic ambiguity, and plausible deniability (Hodges 2019, p. 149). In this context, meaning becomes unstable not accidentally but functionally: claims can be advanced, amplified, contradicted, or disavowed in ways that allow falsehoods to circulate while accountability remains diffuse.

Junling Zhu's recent analysis of Trump's inaugural address grounds this diagnosis in peer-reviewed discourse analysis. Drawing on Hallidayan systemic functional linguistics and Faircloughian critical discourse analysis, Zhu identifies "mechanisms of semiotic manipulation" through which populist rhetoric organizes political reality around division, threat, restoration, and collective affect (Zhu 2024, p. 257). Zhu's framework is useful here because it shifts attention from isolated falsehoods to the discursive procedures through which political language shapes perception. In this respect, McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton, Hodges, and Zhu describe in contemporary terms a problem that Levertov's poetry addresses formally: the severing of words from bodies, agency, evidence, and responsibility.

The article's claim, then, is not that Levertov anticipated Trump-era discourse, nor that contemporary politics should become the privileged frame for reading her Vietnam poems. Rather, Levertov offers a historically situated poetics of critical language awareness. Her poems train readers to detect the operations by which public language launders harm into necessity, procedure, or common sense. In "During the Eichmann Trial," this training takes the form of restored ethical perception; in "Life at War," it takes the form of bodily insistence; in "Prologue: An Interim," it emerges through quotation, juxtaposition, and semantic exposure. Together, these poems define language ethics as a formal and moral practice: the work of keeping words answerable to bodies, actions, and consequences.

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Notes

- ¹ Denise Levertov, "Some Notes on Organic Form," *Poetry* 106, no. 6 (September 1965): 420–25. Levertov's essay is particularly useful here because it defines organic form as a mode of perception or "apperception," which fits the article's argument about ethical perception.

- ² Denise Levertov to Larry Eigner, 17 August 1968 (Levertov 1968), LEP. In this letter, Levertov reflected on the personal cost of her involvement in the Boston Five trial, writing that she felt “exhausted because when one concentrates on one single thing that way one’s inner life goes to hell and one’s imagination aches from disuse.” The remark illuminates the tension between moral engagement and creative vitality that runs through this period of her work.

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